

The cats of Parliament Hill

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If you have ever toured the grounds of Parliament Hill in our nation's capital city, you may have noticed some unusual structures. A set of miniature parliament buildings is occupied not by dignified legislators but by cats of all shapes and sizes. This is the home of the parliamentary cats, just as famous a tourist attraction as the parliament buildings themselves. The official website for the federal government has a page for the cats <http://www.parliamenthill.gc.ca/histoire-histoire/terrains-grounds/snctr-sn.cry-eng.html>. Not to be left out of the social media rage, the cats even have their own blog <http://www.synapse.net/kgerken/CatsBlog.HTM> and Facebook page.

The parliamentary cats are a community of feral cats occupying a shelter located on the grounds of Parliament Hill in Ottawa. The shelter is built in the trees that edge the rear of Parliament Hill. The sanctuary consists of a small series of structures resembling mock parliament buildings inside a small enclosure for the cats. The colony is home to many stray cats, varying from around a dozen up to 28. Raccoons, groundhogs, squirrels and the occasional badger also drop by to take advantage of the food and shelter. Birds are also starting to drop by to partake of the hospitality. The animals are all free to roam the grounds and the property.

The cat colony traces its existence to 1826 when Lieutenant-Colonel John By arrived in the Ottawa area to supervise the construction of the Rideau Canal. The canal was to connect a series of natural waterways between Kingston and the Ottawa River. Some source-



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es say that Colonel By brought cats to the Hill to deal with the rodent populations.

In the first Parliament Buildings (Centre Block was destroyed in the 1916 fire) and the current structures, cats were allowed to roam within buildings to catch rodents and other pests. In 1955, they were replaced by chemicals and the cats of Parliament Hill were left without a home. Until 1970, grounds keepers brought food to feed the cats in various locations but there was no organized plan to

look after the animals on a permanent basis.

In the early 1970's, Irene Desormeaux began taking care of the feral cats that roamed among the historic landmarks and structures of Parliament Hill. In the mid 1980's, Rene Chartrand began helping Irene look after the cats at the colony. He began building some wooden structures where the cats were able to keep warm during the frigid Ottawa winters. After Irene passed away in 1987, the caretaker job was inherited by

Rene Chartrand. In 1997 Rene built the existing structures out of plywood and modeled them after the nearby Centre Block of the Parliament Buildings.

Chartrand, now in his mid-eighties, has been the primary caregiver of the homeless felines. Twice daily, every day of the year, he devotedly puts out bowls of food for the cats. Food is provided by a pet food manufacturer and public donations are gratefully received. No public funding goes towards the shelter, and all work and maintenance is done by a team of dedicated volunteers who volunteer their time to this unique cause. According to Wikipedia, all the cats are spayed and neutered and health care is provided by an Ottawa veterinary hospital. The cost in keeping the cats healthy and fed runs to about \$6,000 a year, some of which is collected in donations.

The cat sanctuary has become a popular tourist attraction and continues to generate interest and excitement for the thousands of visitors to Parliament Hill. The dichotomy between the formality of the Parliament buildings and a humble animal shelter is readily apparent. As noted on the official web page - it is perhaps reflective of the Canadian character of compassion and tolerance that the two can exist almost side by side. After all, it would be hard to envision an animal shelter on the grounds near the United States Capitol. Whatever the reason, the Cat Colony on Parliament Hill is a benchmark in human compassion and animal welfare.