

The Way It Works by Cindy Williams

One of the most common questions I get asked about Lakeside Nature Center's wildlife rehab program is, "Where do you get the animals from?" (to be honest, the MOST common question I get is "Why would you save a possum?", but let's ignore that one). Folks are sometimes surprised (and often dismayed) to learn that we don't go out collecting animals that we find or hear about – we have to depend on the kindness of strangers, so to speak.

Lakeside Nature Center exists to serve the public in many ways. One of the ways that we do so is to provide a resource for the hapless person who runs across an injured or abandoned animal and wants to help it. In many cases it starts with a desperate search for help. Most people turn to the internet if they don't already know about the Center and may start down several paths before they finally discover we can provide help for them.

Usually their next move is a phone call. Staff members and volunteers answer the phone during the day, and a dedicated team of volunteers also checks the answering machine throughout the evening to provide advice for the general public on what to do with the animal. If it is injured, it's a matter of keeping it safe and warm until it can be brought into the Center. If the animal is an uninjured baby (or babies) then we try as hard as we can to reunite that animal with its mother for two reasons. First, the mother can care for it much better than we ever could. She not only provides the appropriate nutritional diet for the species, but she also teaches it valuable behaviors that will benefit it as an adult. Secondly, we do not have the resources to care for every baby animal in the metro area that is healthy with a viable parent. We MUST save our resources for those animals that genuinely need our help. In this urban environment, wild animals are challenged by dogs, cats, traffic, and humans in addition to the "natural" dangers – we cannot accept a baby just because it will potentially be faced with those challenges. We depend heavily on the public to help that animal in the best possible way they can, which includes putting it back where it came from (with whatever safeguards they can).

**The Center's
phone – 816-513-
8960 – is manned
by volunteers until
9:00 every night**



**Photo by C Williams, FOLNC
Volunteer**

Once it has been determined that an animal really needs our help (it's injured or the parents are missing or dead), then the animal must be transported to the Center. Unfortunately we cannot go around the city retrieving animals. We must depend on the person who finds the animal to bring it in. We accept animals every day of the week, even those days when the Center is closed.

Once at the Center, the person and the animal(s) are taken to the check-in table near the rehab hospital – there is a separate door to this check-in area to the right of the main entrance. It has a buzzer that should be used to get the attention of the staff and volunteers during normal intake hours.

The check-in process is relatively simple, but very important and the first step is creating a chart for the animal. We gather information about the



Photo by W Wilson, FOLNC Volunteer

circumstances (my dog got hold of this baby bunny, I found this injured Great Horned Owl on the side of the road bleeding, this baby squirrel was alone in the yard after a storm, I accidentally ran over this turtle) and the area of the city in which the animal(s) was found. In many cases we try to release the rehabbed animal in the same area it came from, particularly the adult animal that might have a mate or a home area in which it feels most comfortable. An adult animal introduced to a different area might be made very unwelcome by the local animals. In some species there are also various diseases that might be carried to a different area and introduced to a whole new

population of that species – deer, for instance, are required to be released in the same county in which they were found. This is also why there are strict limits on taking animals across a state line. It may seem strange since we are so close to the state line and critters can cross that line at will, but it is a very important restriction that we must take seriously both for practical purposes and for legal reasons.

It is also important for us to know what care was given to the animal, if any food or liquids were given or offered, and what potential harm occurred - for instance, if a cat caused an injury to an animal, it is imperative that the animal be started on antibiotics to fight the infection that will surely occur. The intake forms (or charts) also contain a unique number that is assigned to that animal or litter of animals (e.g. 14-00001 would be the first animal checked in for the year 2014, and if there are three babies in the litter they would be assigned the letters a, b, and c.)

Once we have accepted an animal into the Center and gathered all the appropriate information, the next step is to do an assessment of the animal. This step is normally done by a staff member because it requires an intimate knowledge of the species' anatomy and normal condition. The assessment is a head-to-toe affair and includes feeling extremities for breaks, checking eyes for damage or signs of internal injury, looking for exterior wounds, peering in ears to see if there is blood that might indicate a head injury, searching for parasites, evaluating hydration levels – all the things that could help determine what is wrong with the animal and what course of treatment to pursue (or even if it is

possible to pursue any course of treatment). If an animal has an injury that could not be healed in such a way that would allow the animal to be released back into the wild, then that animal must be put down. It is the law and it is what is best for the animal – wild animals do not make good pets, nor is it in the best interest of the animal to do so. Exceptions are made for animals that can be used as education animals, but they are few and far between and must be approved by the proper authorities.

Once the assessment is complete, the next step is usually to warm the animal up or allow it to de-stress before working with it again (or even before the assessment if it is too cold or stressed). At this point (either before or after the warming) the animal is weighed, aged, and sexed, those stats are noted on their treatment chart and it is put into an appropriate cage or container. Babies will usually go into the incubator (often in a plastic coffee container with toweling inside to simulate a nest) or possibly into a cage with a heating pad under it (on low) or a warming light on it (not too close). Food is usually not a main priority – depending on the injury or age of the animal, it is more important to hydrate it by either tubing or providing subcutaneous fluids. Stabilization is much more important than nutrition or even wound care, initially.

At this point we have a decent idea what is wrong with the animal (not always – I sure wish they could just tell us what happened to them or where they hurt and how we can help them) and can make a plan of action as to what is best for it. Breaks must be splinted, wounds must be cleaned, head and spinal injuries must be treated with steroids, etc... Babies have to be stimulated to



Week-old Bobcat. Photo by P Dover, FOLNC Volunteer

encourage pooping and peeing and started on the formula that is specific to their species, weight and age. They are usually started on a 50% solution in order to introduce the new “milk” to their little bodies slowly and help with hydration.

Ideally very young babies are fed every few hours (for mammals – birds require even more frequent nutrition) and for this reason the young'uns are farmed out to home rehabbers as quickly as possible since it is impossible to provide around the clock feedings in the confines of the regular working hours at the Center. Home rehabbers are absolutely essential to the care of baby animals. Throughout the spring

and summer we are inundated with litter after litter after litter of bunnies, squirrels, opossums, raccoons and songbirds. The sheer volume alone would be impossible for staff and on-site volunteers to keep up with, let alone the

extended feeding hours. Even the mode of delivery for the formula is different for each species – opossums and bunnies must be tube-fed, squirrels suck from a syringe with a nipple on the end and raccoons are usually bottle-fed. Home rehabbers must, at their own expense but with help from the Center, educate and equip themselves with the means to take care of their precious charges. And they must become certified with the Missouri Department of Conservation (or U.S. Fish and Wildlife for birds) in order to be allowed to keep wild animals at home until release. The general public is allowed to keep wildlife at their home only long enough to transport them to the Center or a certified wildlife rehabber, otherwise it is illegal to keep and raise wild animals with very few exceptions.

Now that we've got the animal(s) started on a routine of care, we have to provide that care daily (and in many cases 2 or 3 times/day, even more for babies). Wounds must be treated and re-banded daily, animals that cannot eat must be hand fed (usually by inserting a tube directly into the stomach or crop, or forcing food into the animal's mouth and letting them swallow) and hydrated at least once/day, cages must be cleaned daily, physical therapy must be provided, water fowl and turtles must be allowed time in the water, snakes and frogs must be misted – the type of care needed is determined by the species and the issue that brought them to the Center in the first place.

On any given day, staff and volunteers might be tube-feeding a Red-Tailed Hawk with a head injury (a two-person job if ever there was one), gluing a



Volunteers don special headgear to avoid imprinting raptors

fractured Red-Eared Slider shell back together, debriding necrotic tissue from a Virginia Opossum tail, putting Gentamycin drops into a Goldfinch's eye with conjunctivitis, providing physical therapy on a Cooper's Hawk's healed wing, giving a Canada Goose swim time (with crickets if they're lucky), picking greens from the yard for an Eastern Cottontail, wrangling an adult Gray Squirrel to give it a shot of antibiotics, fashioning a splint for an American Robin's broken leg out of a paper clip and tape, taking a Great Horned Owl

to the vet for an x-ray of a potential broken wing, preparing food for the various songbirds in the outdoor aviary (from worms to fruit to sunflower seeds to millet to suet to soaked cat chow) or a million other things that are just part of the daily life of a wildlife rehabber (and always, clean and feed, clean and feed, clean and feed). And don't forget the staff and volunteers also have to provide daily care for the education animals in addition to the rehab animals (including

medical care when necessary), present education programs, answer questions from the public and whatever other tasks are required.

As an animal's care progresses, many things change including the type of caging it needs, its dietary requirements and the amount of hands-on required (usually less and less). Babies must be weaned off formula and onto their natural diet (an often messy and time-consuming task). Throughout the process every attempt is made to handle the animal as little as possible and as the day approaches when the animal will be released back into the wild (could be days or weeks or months) it is more and more important to ready it for its natural environment and make sure it is wary of humans. In



Goslings must practice swimming

some cases animals must be delivered to areas outside the metro – for instance, in the case of migratory birds whose flock has already flown south for the winter. Otherwise it might be necessary to keep the animal over the winter, which is not an ideal situation. Animals that hibernate must be over-wintered if they cannot be released in time for them to find a good hibernation den (true for many reptiles and amphibians). Animals that were delivered by a caring member of the public from the surrounding countryside might need to be returned there.

Home rehabbers who raise babies are tasked with the job of finding appropriate release sites for their charges, away from the city but within reasonable driving distance (since they release many litters per season) – these sites are not always easy to find as it requires a natural area with a water source, accessible to the rehabber but not too accessible for the general public. It must be an area with some members of the species but not too many, which means you can't go back to the same site too often in the same season or even from year to year. Opossums can't be released in an area with horses, raccoons can't be released in waterfowl refuge areas, Fox Squirrels can't be released in an area with primarily Gray Squirrels – the list goes on.

All this takes place behind the scenes and you may not ever be aware of the dedication it takes to make it happen by a relatively small number of people. What is most amazing to me is that anyone (me and even you) can participate in this process as little or as much as you'd like as long as you are willing to put in the time to learn and dedicate yourself to regular attendance (frequently or infrequently).

Volunteers can participate in any number of ways, and every level of interaction is required – some volunteers love to work with the animals, some don't feel comfortable and find other things to do, some are allergic and can't spend too much time at the Center – we have tasks for every type of volunteer. Phone calls can be answered from home in the evenings, laundry baskets with netting that we use for birds always need to be repaired. There are fun

education events to staff, the front desk that always needs to be manned during business hours, laundry must be done and put away, newspapers must be collected and distributed for lining cages, dishes need to be washed – none of these tasks require hands-on animal expertise and can be accomplished with minimal training. But of course if the appeal is to work with animals, there are plenty of jobs (primary and support) to be done in that area as well.

Every task, every single thing that gets done, helps to further the objective of the Center to help our area wildlife thrive in an area overrun with an introduced species – namely, us. Just want to donate? We love that level of participation as well!

Thank you for all that you do to help us do what we do.