

The Heat is On By Cindy Williams

Was it really only a month ago that I was wondering when the weather was going to warm up? Although I wasn't exactly complaining about cooler weather (I like it much better than hot weather) I would like to take back those words and allow the coolness to come back and temper the premature summer heat we've been having. It's hard on us and it's hard on the critters who don't have air conditioning, too--though they can handle it much better than we can.

How about a few updates for a change of pace? Here's a photo of one of our Red Foxes who came in with mange--you may recall they look incredibly pathetic and sad when they come in, but as I mentioned last month their prognosis is decent with a round of Ivermectin and some tender loving care. As long as they can participate in their own recovery (i.e. eat and drink), they do pretty well as this beautiful example shows. This one is doing great and ready to be released back to his home territory!



The Franklin's Gull with the broken wing is (fortunately and unfortunately) still with us. His wing is still mending and doing ok, but he's given himself some other minor injuries by banging around in his cage. Now that his break is healing we have moved him to a larger pen and put some bumpers on his "wrists" to keep him from injuring them more. He's still eating well and seems to be pretty rambunctious so we'll hope for the best.

Early spring is all about baby squirrels (and bunnies), then comes baby opossums (and bunnies) and now we've moved on to baby skunks and raccoons--and bunnies. I rehab Virginia Opossums (that's the technical name for them, but we lovingly call them "possies"). In the past I've seen black possies and white possies and everything in between, but I've never seen cinnamon possies. I've seen cinnamon raccoons but not cinnamon opossums. This year I have a litter of eight, with six normal possies and two cinnamon ones. Here is one of them when I first got them--their eyes were open, so they were old enough to be out of mom's pouch but not old enough to survive on their own. They were probably about 70 days old and already the survivors of many trials. Opossums, North America's only native marsupial, are born as tiny, naked neonates no bigger than a dime. Their very first trial occurs immediately when they must race their siblings across their mother's fur and into her pouch where they latch on to one of sixteen teats (there could be more than sixteen born, but only those who find a teat will survive). But even finding one does not guarantee survival since not all sixteen are likely to be working. Once they've found a working teat they are set - as long as mom is ok they will continue to grow in her pouch, nearly swallowing the nipple and having instant access to a snack at any time. Over the next two months they will remain snug in her pouch where they will grow to the size of a mouse and develop fur. If something happens to mom during this time the babies will continue to suckle her milk, which can kill them if they are not removed relatively quickly.



Assuming they manage to find a working teat and mom manages to stay alive for the next two months, the babies will begin to emerge from the pouch and ride on mom's back as she waddles to and fro looking for just about anything she can find to eat. The next trial is

staying on her back. These little babies are great at hanging on – they don't lose that instinct when they lose their mom, either. Some of those little cuties love to hang on to my finger, shirt, hair – whatever they can grab if they think I'm mom and I'm about to leave without them. Their instinct is so amazing that sometimes they even try to grab on with their mouth. And they can grip hard. It breaks my heart a little whenever I have to pry them off and leave them in their cage, where they cry for me to come back and get them with their weird little "chirps". If I had to spell the noise they make it would be "chit". But as good as they are at hanging on and calling for mom, sometimes they get left behind. If mom has to run from a predator or crawl under a fence or through dense brush, one of her many babies may fall off and go unnoticed. Unlike every other baby you might come across, if you see a baby opossum without his mom around, it's almost certain he's an orphan and mom probably isn't coming back. He needs help.

And then, of course, there are the babies who become orphaned all at once when mom dies – usually hit by a car when she's in the road eating carrion. Her instinct is to stare down the threat and hiss and drool but that doesn't work well against a car; and maybe not against a dog if she wanders into his back yard. And that's what happened with our little cinnamon pair and their siblings. Luckily the dog owner was able to save the litter and bring them to Lakeside where I picked them up and started rehabbing them at home. As I write



this, they have been fully weaned and have graduated to a larger intermediate cage where they have begun to forget me (sigh) and concentrate on climbing and eating and drinking and, um, shall we say eliminating. They eliminate a lot, and their instinct is to do it in water so I always keep a dish for, um, elimination (a toilet, one might say) and a water bottle for drinking. They are still extremely cute and I can still handle them if I have to but once they move on to this

stage I stop weighing them and hand feeding them and they start to become wilder. The next step is to move them to my garage to start acclimating them to the weather, then to a larger outdoor cage for them to finish growing and adapting to being outside. The final step is releasing them to a good, possie-appropriate habitat. A sad and happy day for me, nothing but happy for them. Hopefully the cinnamon twins and their siblings will do well with the good start I have given them.

It takes a decent and courageous person to save any wild animal, but when that wild animal is able to spray a noxious odor at you that will linger long after several showers – well, that rescuer might just be considered a saint. We get our fair share of saints who bring in orphaned baby skunks but we have very few rehabbers willing to take on these challenging babies. Having done a little babysitting for these rehabbers I can tell you that baby skunks are adorable with a capitol ADORE! They are love bugs, too. And yes, they have their scent glands already but they are not able to control them yet. So accidents happen if they roughhouse with their siblings or get startled, but in general the little ones are not much different than any other wild mammal baby. Here are a few that came in this month after losing mom – how cute are they?! Thank you, thank you, thank you to the people who cared enough to handle them and bring them to us (as well as all the other thousands of animals that arrive at our door every year). And an even bigger thank you to those rehabbers willing to raise and



release them. It is not a task for the faint of heart! You are all heroes! And a few of you might even be saints.