

Area women rehab injured, orphaned animals

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A s more land is taken up by houses and businesses, there is becoming less room for wildlife. Some lose their homes, others are killed or injured by cars.

When animals are hurt or orphaned, the fortunate ones are helped by licensed wildlife rehabilitators like Deb Welter of Diamond Rock Wildlife Rehabilitation Clinic in Tredeghin and Susan Birch of West Brantford-based Wild Wings.

"With all the development and all the displacement, we can get 25 calls a day," said Birch, who is licensed to care for migratory birds. "We specialize in small birds, also water fowl, and any sort of wild bird that is not a raptor. We've had close to 90 different species over the years."

"It's almost exclusively by some kind of human interference," said Welter, explaining how many baby animals are orphaned when their mother is killed by a car, or their home is destroyed when trees are cut. Additionally, people may find animals in their own homes, living in attics or other spaces.

Only trained wildlife rehabilitators licensed by the Pennsylvania Game Commission are authorized to take care of hurt or orphaned wild animals and birds. This is particularly important in the case of rabid vector species — those that have the potential to be rabies carriers — such as raccoons, skunks, foxes, groundhogs and bats that Welter cares for.

Anyone thinking of keeping a wild animal should not, Welter noted. Not only is it illegal, but also it is unwise for the animal and the people. "Wild animals do not make good pets. Raccoons can get all the feline and canine diseases plus parasites," she said, adding that pet vaccines are not guaranteed effective for other animals. "Raccoons in particular are extremely adorable as babies." But, "they can rip through your house like you wouldn't believe."

Welter advises anyone who finds an animal they think needs help to first call a wildlife rehabilitator. "You definitely do not want to handle any wildlife with bare hands," she cautions. She also warns that even if an animal looks abandoned, it may not be. "There are animals that leave their babies alone almost all day like rabbit and deer. Always call a rehabilitator first."

The case is much the same for birds. Birch explains that many well-meaning people who have bluebird boxes may miss seeing the parents and think the nestlings are abandoned when in fact, they are not. "Probably 90 percent of the time they don't need to intervene."

Life for rehabilitators like Welter and Birch is not easy, particularly in the spring when there are large numbers of baby animals to be cared for. "During baby season, I can't leave the house," Welter said, adding that even with volunteer helpers, she is nearly overwhelmed. "When spring or summer come, it's a 20-hour-a-day job."

Welter became a wildlife rehabilitator after first working as a volunteer. "I've always been an animal lover and wanted to help them," she said. Birch also began as an animal lover and volunteer at the Lancaster County Wildlife Center 15 years ago. "You have to be motivated by a licensed rehabilitator. It usually takes two years of study before you're ready to take your test," Birch said. There are also continuing education courses and seminars needed to stay updated on current standards. "It's a lifelong learning process."

Welter raises the young animals with as little human contact as possible so that they will be better able to return to the wild. The youngsters are kept in large cages with pools and branches so they can perfect their climbing skills before they are released on private property. "They're not human friendly by the time I release them," Welter said.

Welter takes in many raccoons, keeping them until they are about 6½ months old. "They eat much better than I do. They have graduated from dog and cat food to mice and foods caught in their little pools. Raccoons are the ultimate omnivores," she said.

Last spring, Welter had a more unusual visitor. Someone had found a coyote pup in the Exton area, and thinking it was a puppy, took it to the Chester County SPCA. Welter was called in, but the pup had to be transferred to a rehabilitator in New York to be raised properly. "They have to grow up with animals of their own kind," Welter explained.

Welter suggests that rather than calling an animal control company immediately when homeowners think an animal is in their home, place a flashlight and radio in the area, which could encourage the animal to leave on its own. She also advises that if they are having trees cut, check before the work is done to see if there are any animals nesting in openings or on the branches.

As more and more development goes on in Chester County, the numbers of orphaned and injured animals keeps rising. Welter and Birch are the only licensed re-



Keeping the Wild in Wildlife

Chester County Living

Staff photos by Larry Madritch and the camera crew. Clockwise from top left, Susan Birch releases a Grackle into the wild. A pair of house finch babies. A baby raccoon is fed. A Cedar Waxwing fledgling. Deb Welter towels off a baby fox. A Malard with a head injury. Baby foxes huddle up in a makeshift den.

What to do if you find a 'lost' baby animal

Most baby animals that appear to be lost are not. The parent is often nearby. In most cases, humans should let the animal be and leave so the parent will return. There are some exceptions. Here is a guide:

Baby rabbit
When in doubt, call a rehabilitator. Your local animal shelter, pet store, or the National Wildlife Rehabilitation Association, www.nwrc-wildlife.org.

Baby squirrel
Leave it alone if:
• It's enticed as big as a tennis ball and eating grass.
• It's in a nest and the mother is coming for it. Check by placing a couple of light bags across the nest and coming back the next day to see if they've been disturbed.
Call a rehabilitator if:
• You've checked as above and the nest is abandoned.
• The nest has been destroyed, such as by a dog.

Baby deer
Leave it alone if:
• It's mostly covered with leafhops.
• You see parents coming for it.
• It's hard to catch, if it can get away from you if provoked by hand.
Call a rehabilitator if:
• It is injured or was struck by a car.
• It is sitting in the open steep, and you see no parents taking care of it after going away and giving them a chance to return.

Baby bird
Leave it alone if:
• It is sitting on the ground and is not being bothered by flies. The mother will leave it alone while she grazes.
Call a rehabilitator if:
• The baby is not moving, or gets flustered if it may be ill or injured.
• You know the mother is dead — such as a fowl found beside a dead owl.
• NOTE: Do not attempt to approach a dead owl about 15 pounds both you and the deer may be injured. Deer can fall on adult human in all cases, if an animal is obviously injured, with a broken limb or bleeding, call a rehabilitator.

Baby fox
For more information on wild bird rehabilitation, see Birch's Web site at www.wildbirdrehab.org. For information on small mammals, visit Welter's Web site at www.diamondrockwildlife.org.

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