

Family Values for a Different Kind of Family

The Wildlife Aid Brigade works to keep wild babies and their kin together and safe

BY RUTHANNE JOHNSON

Where might you find a shoebox, a sock, chemical hand warmer, a juice carton, a bungee cord, a set of binoculars, and a net all in one place?

Check the kit of wildlife rehabilitator Sue Lunsun Farinato. She carries these tools in her car at all times.

She's not planning to bungee jump into a damaged squirrel nest or present a deer with a new pair of killer pumps. The bungee cord and the juice carton can be used to create a makeshift home for an animal whose nest has been destroyed. The shoebox can hold a small injured animal for transport, and the sock and chemical hand-warmer will keep him warm during the trip. Every item in her tool kit is there for a purpose: Helping her save the lives of wild creatures who've run into one misfortune or another.

Farinato, who spends her days as a program assistant in The Humane Society of the United States' Pets at Risk program, doesn't stop thinking about animals in her off hours.

The tools she hauls around in her trunk are also educational, helping her demonstrate techniques during the specialized training program she developed to teach students the basics of wildlife rescue in the urban environment. Based in Washington, D.C. and formed in 2007, the Wildlife Aid Brigade helps animal shelters and other agencies deal with wildlife-related calls by teaching their staff and volunteers how to handle the conflicts that arise when humans come face to face with the wild in their own yards and attics.

Farinato has been involved in wildlife rescue and rehabilitation for more than 10 years, and she says that while great strides have been made in getting people to resolve conflicts more humanely, our society has a long way to go.

"It takes special knowledge and care when it comes to helping wild animals without harming them," she explains, "and most people know very little about wildlife—even the creatures who live in their own backyard."

Wild animals in suburban and urban environments are surrounded by hazards: speeding cars, sharp-bladed lawnmowers, pet attacks. Animals also compete with humans



Using the bodies of wild animals who were too sick or badly injured for successful rehabilitation, volunteers learn the anatomical features of various species and get to practice handling techniques without stressing live animals.

for space, sometimes choosing a warm attic or a chimney for shelter. Most people have little tolerance for animals nesting in their homes, and eviction is an all-too-common solution.

When this is done, parents and their young can be killed, injured, or separated from each other. A homeowner cuts down a tree limb, and the attached squirrel's nest filled with unweaned babies falls to the ground. A mother duck is shooed out of a backyard while her ducklings scatter and hide in the bushes. A raccoon family is trapped in an attic by a nuisance wildlife control operator who—unbeknownst to the homeowner—kills the mother and her babies after he leaves the property.

Farinato would like to see such problems occur less frequently. People who have conflicts with local wildlife typically call their local

animal shelter, police department, wildlife care center, or nuisance wildlife trapper. In 2003, Farinato was asked by the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments (COG) to participate in crafting and executing a survey tracking incoming wildlife calls for all the major agencies in the D.C. area. The survey documented thousands of wildlife-related calls to these agencies, with a huge spike in calls between April and September—baby season.

It also tracked the results of each call, which typically hinged on which agency received it. Here there was a huge discrepancy: Calls to nuisance trappers usually ended in death for the animal, while calls to wildlife care centers tended to have a much more positive outcome. Calls to animal shelters and other agencies fell somewhere in between.

[scoop]

Animal shelters and municipal animal control agencies are primarily trained to deal with companion animals, and rarely have the time or the training to determine if an animal should be left in the wild or brought in for care, Farinato says. Once an ACO is dispatched to the scene, he will usually scoop up the animal and take it back to the local animal shelter for holding until it can be transported to the nearest wildlife rehabilitation center.

That's not the worst that could happen, but it's often not the best option, either: Many of these cases involve perfectly healthy wild babies who merely need to be re-nested or reunited with their parent. While shelters justifiably euthanize critically injured or sick animals, they may end up euthanizing a healthy animal if nearby wildlife rehabilitation centers have no available space.

"Many wildlife situations call for nothing more than a little knowledge, patience, and time," Farinato says. "This is particularly true when it comes to keeping a baby animal together with its family, but animal control officers don't have 90 minutes to watch a



SUE FARINATO/WILDLIFE AID BRIGADE

Volunteers learn to make substitute nests for baby birds whose nests were destroyed or who had fallen from nests too high to reach. Substitute nests often help reunite baby birds with parents.

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fledgling on the ground to make sure it has not been abandoned, let alone the time it takes to renege a baby animal and then wait to see if its parent returns.”

During her eight years volunteering at a local wildlife rehabilitation center, Farinato says, about 50 percent of the animals brought in were perfectly healthy babies who were probably not even orphaned.

For Farinato, the survey results highlighted serious flaws in the system. It was the impetus for her creation of the Wildlife Aid Brigade.

She went to the COG committee and pitched her idea for a volunteer-based program, in which people who’d been trained on proper wildlife response would work out of a local animal shelter. Three shelters—the Animal Welfare League of Arlington, the Animal Welfare League of Alexandria, and Prince George’s County Animal Services—were the first to sign up.

Wildlife Aid Brigade students attend several classroom sessions, including one at a working wildlife rehabilitation center. After the classroom segment, students begin volunteering through their preferred shelter. They do ride-alongs with an animal control officer, answer wildlife-related phone calls, and eventually handle rescue calls in the field—when rescue is actually necessary.

“It was a new approach to take, that we were going to try and leave healthy wildlife in the wild instead of having these babies go out to rehabbers,” says Jennifer Newman, manager of education and community services for Animal Welfare League of Arlington.

Going into her shelter’s third year of participation, Newman says the program has enhanced her staff’s knowledge about wildlife, freed up time for animal control officers to focus more on companion animal calls, and improved public relations. “People seem to really appreciate the time that volunteers give when they go out on a call, and this has helped put us more in the public eye,” she says.

More importantly, Newman says the program has undoubtedly saved animals’ lives, directly and indirectly. “Having volunteers spend time in the field gives the public opportunities to ask questions and to become more comfortable with wildlife living near to them.”

Wildlife Aid Brigade volunteer Regina Evans works out of the Animal Welfare League of Alexandria and remembers a situ-



Doing his best E.T. impression, a squirrel who invaded a homeowner’s basement tries to hide from the Wildlife Aid Brigade.

ation that could easily have ended badly, had the nuisance trapper that the homeowner also called arrived first.

A squirrel had made its way into the homeowner’s basement, and when Evans arrived she found it hiding on a shelf lined with the woman’s stuffed animal collection—koalas, bears, ponies, and birds. “It was so funny because every once in a while the squirrel would peek out from behind a stuffed bear to see what we were doing,” says Evans.

Working with another volunteer, she cleared the area around the shelf, caught the squirrel with a net, and released her into the homeowner’s back yard, where she promptly ran up a tree and began chattering. Evans also educated the homeowner, who had no idea about what nuisance wildlife trappers typically do with the animals they catch. “The woman was so grateful for our help that she said wanted to make a donation to the shelter,” Evans says.

Eventually, Farinato hopes to take the training to a national level. If your shelter struggles to handle wildlife calls and you’re interested in learning more, contact Farinato at info@wildlifeaidbrigade.org or visit her website at wildlifeaidbrigade.org.

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