

Care for critters: Nonprofit wildlife center in need of helping hands



Volunteer Vicki Windham bottle feeds a young raccoon recently. Alan Lehman/Daily



Dr. Belinda Burwell, veterinarian, founder and president of the wildlife center examines an injured young red fox at the center.



Peggy Coontz, director of Blue Ridge Wildlife Center near Millwood, feeds a young flycatcher as two young house finches wait for their turn at the center. Alan Lehman/Daily



An osprey recovers at the wildlife center while being treated for lead poisoning. Alan Lehman/Daily

**By Linwood
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MILLWOOD
— Whether it's
a wounded
heron or an
abandoned
fawn, help for
native injured
and orphaned
wildlife
animals is just
a phone call
away.

And with
summer on the
horizon,
officials with
the Blue Ridge
Wildlife Center
in Millwood
are reminding
local residents
to alert
authorities to
animals in
need of
immediate
medical
assistance.



A great blue heron, which is recuperating from a gunshot wound that shattered a bone in its wing, looks down from a high perch in a shed.
Alan Lehman/Daily ([Purchase photo](#))

They're also informing them of the dos and don'ts of caring for species until help arrives.

Belinda Burwell, a local veterinarian, opened the wildlife center — operated in a small cottage built in the early 1800s at 930 Tilthammer Mill Road in Boyce — in 2004. Burwell says the center, which serves Winchester and Clarke, Frederick, Warren, Shenandoah, Fauquier and Loudoun counties, was sorely needed because many people who encountered native wildlife didn't know where to take animals for treatment.

"Sometimes they were taking the animals home and didn't know how to adequately care for them. Sometimes, the animals were being euthanized, or they would die because of inadequate care. That's why we started this," said Burwell, who is the president of the center. "Now, word [about the wildlife center] has spread."

Last year, the center rescued about 627 native wild animals from its service area and gave 40 educational programs in the community. With the amount of wildlife being admitted to the center increasing by almost 50 percent annually, the group expects to rescue about 1,000 animals this year, Burwell said.

But, treating a growing population of wildlife isn't the only challenge for volunteers and employees at the center. Because the center does not receive any local, state or federal funding, or charge any fees for rescuing and treating wildlife, it is operated solely on monetary donations from the community, and finding enough funds to keep the center up and running is often difficult.

It costs about \$60,000 to operate the center on an annual basis, Burwell said, adding that the center is also seeking to raise funds for new rehabilitation cages and food and medical supplies for animals. The organization is also actively recruiting more volunteers.

"[The cost to operate the center] has been going up with the number of animals coming in. We need to hire more staff," Burwell said. "One of our great needs right now is trying to buy a golf cart we can use to drive around."

In addition to monetary donations, the wildlife center is also in need of supplies such as kennels, storage bins, sheets and towels, and fencing materials, among a long list of other items.

Animals being treated at the center have various needs and come from all sorts of backgrounds, including an osprey receiving treatment for lead poisoning and a red-tailed hawk who broke its wing and had nearly starved to death because it was unable to catch food.

"We get calls from all over the place. We've gotten calls from Arlington. In fact, I got a call for a bat that was in Manassas," said Vicki Windham, who volunteers at the center. "[The center] is serving an incredibly important role, and you just have to drive down any road to see how many animals are getting hit on the road to know how many animals out there need our services."

Baby raccoons and birds, groundhogs, fawns, and even owls also occupy the facility. The center's goal is to return the animals back to the wild once they're healthy, though there are some that do not survive. Animals brought to the wildlife center are immediately evaluated by veterinarians. If radiographs or surgery is required, the patients are sent to a veterinary hospital.

Still, Burwell said, residents are finding some animals that don't necessarily require assistance from wildlife authorities. For instance, she said, it can be normal to find young fledging birds with short feathers that either cannot fly or can only fly short distances. Small bunnies often seen out by themselves also do not need to be rescued, Burwell said. Baby bunnies are weaned and will leave the nest by 3 to 4 weeks of age.

"If the bunnies' ears are standing up and their bodies are large enough to fill the palm of your hand, they are old enough to be on their own," Burwell said.

Burwell said while it may be tempting for some people to take an orphaned animal home, doing so might be costly. It is against the law to possess wildlife without a permit from the Department of Game and Inland Fisheries. The only wildlife the general public is allowed to possess without a permit are some reptiles and amphibians.

"The first thing to remember is they are wild animals, and they do not make good pets. Not only that, it's also illegal to possess them," Burwell said. "And then, of course, these animals could hurt you. They may look cute, but they can bite you or they can carry diseases. So, you have to be very cautious."

Burwell suggests that people should put injured wildlife in a secure, ventilated box and place the box in a dark, quiet area until help arrives. Baby animals will need to be kept warm, she said.

Animals being treated at the wildlife center require a great deal of privacy during their recovery, a major reason why the center is not open to the public, Burwell said.

"These wild animals need to be left alone as much as possible while they are recovering. We do not want to add any more stress to the injuries they already have," Burwell said. "We also do not want them to become too accustomed to people while they are in captivity because they need to remember to keep a safe distance from people when they are released again."

Peggy Coontz, a wildlife biologist, said the Blue Ridge Wildlife Center's importance to the region should not be underestimated.

"It is amazing, the vastness of the region that we cover and the variety of species that are now brought in, the growth is just phenomenal. If the center was no longer available, it would be devastating to the region," said Coontz, the only paid employee currently on staff at the wildlife center.

If you find wildlife in need of assistance, call the wildlife center at 837-9000 or send an e-mail to info@blueridgewildlife.org. Monetary donations can be sent to: Blue Ridge Wildlife Center, P.O. Box 326, Millwood, VA 22646. Donations are tax-deductible.