



Healing Nature

By Pam Lettie

Source: Clarke Times-Courier

THURSDAY, MARCH 13 2008

For Belinda Burwell, the construction site on Burwell-van Lennep Foundation land in Millwood is more than just a building.

The oval cage is one more step in fulfilling her dream of helping raptors regain their strength after surgery or as they recover from injuries.

Burwell is the president and veterinarian for the Blue Ridge Wildlife Center, a nonprofit that she started in 2000 with just a hotline. The center is a conservation and rehabilitation organization helping injured and orphaned wildlife. Last year alone, the center handled 27 reptiles, 294 mammals and 306 birds – 85 of which were birds of prey. Some need surgery. Some need 24/7 care. Most would have died without the center's intervention.

“This cage is going to make a world of difference. We're going to be able to evaluate things in their physical abilities that we were never able to evaluate before,” explains Peggy Coontz, director of the center.

Conditioning

It's not enough to fix the animal's wounds, Burwell said. The center strives to prepare the animals to survive in the wild.

For birds, that can mean physical therapy and exercises to strengthen their wings, particularly after an operation.

Without strong flight skills, the birds can't hunt. And if they can't hunt, they can't eat. And, if they can't eat, survival becomes tentative. The new building will give the raptors a place to build up their flight muscles.

Burwell's eyes light up as she talks about the birds of prey and her passion for helping them. Her work with the center is unpaid, so she has another job that pays the bills.

“People think I’m crazy,” she said.

Burwell raised \$100,000 for the new cage, primarily through grants.

Called a “continuous flyway,” the exterior flying ring is 14 feet wide in a building that is approximately 65 feet by 50 feet. The oval interior allows birds to fly around and around to condition their muscles. The walls of the new cage will be slats that allow airflow but look like a barrier. Raptors tend to fly straight into wire.

While all birds benefit from the space, birds of prey require the long flight path more than other birds do.

The new structure is only the second facility in Virginia that offers a space large enough for raptors – birds that hunt with their talons.

The other large flight cage is located at the Wildlife Center of Virginia in Waynesboro. There, birds have a narrow 100-foot-long cage where they can fly back and forth. Burwell is accustomed to driving birds there or to Delaware’s Tristate Bird Rescue, so the new cage in Millwood will dramatically shorten the drive to rehab.

Medical care

Burwell acts as surgeon for the injured animals at the center, while center director Coontz monitors their progress.

The Center is located in a house built in the early 1800s. Originally, the building served as an overseer’s house for the man who supervised the slaves.

The living room serves as the exam room, with tables for examining the animals, a computer, a box of files, and a white board for tracking the status of the animals. Coontz has her own shorthand for the white board that she translates as she picks out the animals for Burwell to examine. The sickest birds are housed upstairs where the rooms are climate-controlled and incubators are available if needed.

About 80 percent of the birds of prey at the center have been hit by cars.

Burwell checks out a couple raptors that are recovering from surgery. On Feb. 28, she repaired a red-tailed hawk’s humerus. The broken wing bone was pinned back into position. Then an “external fixator” was attached on the outside of the wing to stabilize it.

As she dabbed antibiotic ointment on the wing, Burwell explained that a University of Minnesota professor designed the technique to help the bone heal properly.

When the birds recover, they move from an upstairs intensive care area to the porch or to the outdoor cages.

In an outside pen, a barred owl is also recovering from humerus surgery, but this injury resulted from buckshot wound. The owl was shot while it was in flight; the crash when it fell caused the wing fracture.

While Coontz holds the owl steady, Burwell works the wing back and forth trying to keep the muscles from contracting. They try to preserve the wing's normal range of motion as it heals.

The surgery and physical therapy have one goal: To prepare the bird for release.

Adult birds that had survival skills before being injured are taken back to where they were found and released. But young birds and mammals may need additional support to make the transition from life in captivity to life in the wild.

For those, Coontz starts with a "soft release." The bird is let go in an area where center workers continue to offer food if needed.

The Center

This is only the fifth season that the Blue Ridge Wildlife Center has been open. It serves Clarke, Frederick, Warren, Loudoun, Fauquier and Shenandoah counties and the city of Winchester. Individuals call the center for help with wild animal injuries or illnesses, as do animal control officers, veterinarians, police, sheriff's deputies or game wardens.

While the new building to help bird rehabilitation is the news this week, the center serves mammals and reptiles as well.

Burwell is there most days, serving as volunteer veterinarian, president of the center, handyman, fund-raiser and grant-writer. She and her husband even built the raptor cages that house the rehabilitating birds.

"It's a 'round-the-clock job. It's not like you can be closed on Saturday or Sunday," Burwell said. Tuesday through Saturday she works at her paying job as a veterinarian helping pets – another one of her loves.

She's not alone in her dedication.

The center's only employee, director Peggy Coontz is a wildlife biologist who lives on the premises.

Her main focus is supportive animal care. After Burwell repairs a wing or leg, Coontz makes sure the animal gets what it needs both in housing and food so it can recover and maintain a high quality of life while it is in captivity.

From April to August, Coontz works many nights caring for young mammals and young birds; orphans comprise the largest patient group in the summer. For them, evening care is as important as daytime care.

“It’s hard when the hours are long. It’s hard when you lose patients, but it’s so rewarding when you release an animal, that makes it all worthwhile,” Coontz said.

Burwell and Coontz feel lucky for all of the volunteer support the center has, although they can always use more.

About a dozen volunteers help with daily animal care, cleaning or yard work. Some have created new educational programs and opportunities to meet the public. Scout troops chip in too. Shenandoah University students are coming out to help build a new cage.

“The volunteer force is amazing,” Coontz says.

The Burwell-van Lennep Foundation lets the center use the cottage for free, in addition to letting them use the land for the new cage.

Tom Leahy at the Rose Hill Veterinary Clinic lets Burwell use their facilities for surgeries and X-rays.

Board member George Ohrstrom offered the services of his construction company for the construction of the new cage.

Burwell’s vision for the center doesn’t end with the flyway, which is expected to be complete in about six months. She sees a future day when a nature center will make the Blue Ridge Wildlife Center accessible to the public.

Coontz, too, dreams of a time when educational animals will be out where the public can enjoy them any time instead of having to schedule a formal program.