

# The Ridgeline

Issue 11  
Spring 2009



Newsletter of the Blue Ridge Wildlife Center

## When Should Wildlife Be Rescued?

Wild animals that appear to be in need of help may, in fact, be just fine. It is important to be sure an animal needs assistance before attempting to intervene, and to know how to rescue a wild animal without injuring yourself or the

animal.

As a rule, an animal with an obvious injury or one that is behaving abnormally will need our help. For example, injured wild animals that have difficulty escaping predators or finding food will need to be rescued and brought to the Wildlife Center. Similarly, an animal that fails to show a normal fear and flee response or exhibits other unusual behavior should be rescued so it can be examined.

If the animal is a species commonly infected with rabies (such as a raccoon, fox, skunk, bat, or groundhog), for your safety be sure to contact the Blue Ridge Wildlife Center BEFORE attempting a rescue.

However, there are some important exceptions, especially concerning young wildlife.

**FAWNS, FOR EXAMPLE**, are commonly found lying quietly on the ground with no mother in sight, and often will let you walk up to them without running away. This does not mean the fawn is in trouble. A doe will normally leave her fawn hidden for most of the day while she goes off to browse for food. A young fawn will not move until its mother returns. Don't be too hasty to rescue a crying fawn because the mother could be waiting for you to leave so she can lead her fawn away.

On the other hand, if you find a fawn that is injured, or whose mother has been killed, call the Wildlife Center for help. Be aware that new regulations govern the rescue and movement of deer in Frederick and Shenandoah Counties due to the risk of spreading Chronic Wasting Disease.

**OVER THE SUMMER, YOUNG BIRDS** with short feathers that either can't fly or can only fly short distances are commonly found on the ground. Many juvenile birds (fledglings) will leave their nests a week or two before they can fly. Their parents still care for them while they are on the ground and, therefore, do not need to be rescued. But if the young bird appears injured or remains in the same place

*As a rule, an animal with an obvious injury will require rescue and one that is behaving abnormally is probably in need of rescue, too. There are false alarms, however, especially with young wildlife.*

for more than a day with no parents in sight, the bird may need to be rescued.

Otherwise, keeping people and pets away from the area will help parents feel safe to return and resume feeding and teaching their young.

A baby bird on the

ground with few or no feathers has probably fallen out of its nest. Baby birds can be successfully put back in their nests and the parents will continue to feed them. If you can't find the nest, or if it was destroyed, there are ways to create a new nest. The Wildlife Center can offer advice with this problem. If the parents are known to be dead, the baby birds must be rescued.

**BABY COTTONTAIL RABBITS** normally leave their nest at a very young age, so finding a very small bunny that cannot run very fast does not mean it needs our help. If the bunny's ears are standing up and its body is large enough to fill the palm of your hand, it is old enough to be on its own. Keep pets out of the area, because these bunnies are not skilled at running from predators such as cats and dogs.

If you or your pets have accidentally uncovered a nest of bunnies, you can cover the nest again. Usually the mother will return to raise the babies or to relocate them. You must keep your pets inside and only let them out on a leash, or they will go looking for the nest again.

If a bird or bunny has been in a pet's mouth, it needs to be rescued even if it doesn't appear to be injured. Exposure to the bacteria in the pet's saliva will make these animals sick, and they will succumb to infection in two to three days if not treated with antibiotics.

**IF YOU NEED TO RESCUE** an injured wild animal, be aware that they are normally very frightened of people and will try to bite, scratch, or grab you with talons. Be careful! Wear gloves or use a thick towel to place or scoop the animal into a secure, ventilated box, and place the box in a dark, quiet area until help arrives.

It is tempting to want to show a rescued animal to your friends and family, but exposure to people is very stressful for these animals, and keeping them in a dark, quiet place is the best treatment you can give until help arrives.

*It is always better for wild animals to remain in the wild whenever possible. But if they need to be rescued, seek professional care rather than trying to care for them yourself. It is against the law for the public to possess wildlife without a special permit from the Virginia Dept. of Game and Inland Fisheries. The law is designed to protect the public from injury and disease, and to protect wild animals from handling by inexperienced people.*

*Check Out the  
Barham Wildlife Painting  
to be Auctioned for the  
Benefit of the  
Wildlife Center!  
See back page.*

## The Ridgeline

Published by  
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The Blue Ridge Wildlife Center is a 501(c)3 non-profit organization that was established to provide assistance for native injured and orphaned wildlife and other helpful information to the public in the Northern Shenandoah Valley. The Center provides quality rehabilitative care for wildlife and operates the Wildlife Hotline at 540-837-9000.

The Center also presents informative environmental education programs for people of all ages. Schools and organizations are invited to call for scheduling and fees.

The Center relies on private donations exclusively; no governmental funding is available. People who share concerns for wildlife and the environment can help the Center by becoming individual or family supporters. Businesses are invited to become sponsors. Contributions are tax-deductible.

## Bats in Crisis

Since its discovery in 2006, a deadly disease called White Nose Syndrome has killed over a million bats in the northeast United States and has spread south to Virginia. Loss of such large populations of insect eating bats is expected to cause an environmental catastrophe of unprecedented magnitude.



This disease gets its name from the white fungus growing on the faces of dead and dying cave dwelling bats. Death rates of hibernating bats in infected caves can reach almost 100%. Researchers are trying to determine whether something has weakened the bat populations, making them susceptible to this fungal infection, or if the fungus is the primary cause of death. One theory is that this newly discovered fungus, from the family of cold-loving soil fungi called Geomyces, infects the skin of bats while they are hibernating because of their lower body temperature. When the bats realize they are infected, they come out of hibernation to fight the infection, and look for insect food to keep their body temperature elevated. Because bats cannot find a sufficient number of insects to eat during the winter months, they die of starvation.

Bats are extremely important for insect control; **a single little brown bat can consume 3,000 insects in a single night.** Without the bats to help with natural insect control, increased pesticide use is expected for protection of crops and livestock and control of insects that spread disease. Increased use of pesticides could also negatively affect other wildlife populations.

The fungus involved in White Nose Syndrome may have been spread from cave to cave by migrating bats or on the equipment used by cavers. Due to the rapid spread of this fungus, and the high mortality of bats in infected caves, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is requesting that all caving activities be suspended and that people stay out of caves until the problem is resolved.

## Albinism in Wildlife

**By Marissa Estep**—Startled by a flash of white, I turned towards the window. The creatures bounding across the field resembled giant rabbits, with brown coats splotted in white—albino deer! Although I later learned that these deer were only partially albino, this did not dampen my excitement at seeing these rare animals.

Our Wildlife Center veterinarian, Dr. Belinda Burwell, has spotted a wild albino red-tailed hawk, not far from the Center!

Defined as the lack of melanin or pigment in the skin, albinism is caused by a recessive genetic trait that controls the processing of this pigment. Unfortunately, animals with unusual coloration often have a decreased rate of survival in the wild. Because of a lack of camouflage, albino animals can easily be singled out in a group, causing them to fall victim to predators.

Albinos often have poor vision, as well, which hinders their ability to find food and evade predators. They often have skeletal deformities such as shorter legs. Since melanin prevents sunburn by blocking light, albinos sunburn easily. Without the strengthening effects of melanin, white feathers in albino birds tend to wear and break more easily than in birds with pigmented feathers.

Albinism appears to affect nearly every mammal species from time to time, but it is most commonly found among deer, mice, and squirrels. In North American bird populations, albinism is mainly found in robins and house sparrows. Albino deer make up less than one percent of the Virginia deer population, according to records from the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries.

What can wildlife lovers do to help unusually colored animals? First of all, leave them alone. Even with color abnormalities, wild animals can care for themselves better than well-meaning humans can, so abnormal coloration is not a reason to rescue an animal.



## Raptor Training Cage Debuts at Center

Raptors at the Blue Ridge Wildlife Center can now exercise in a new on-site continuous flight cage. Our large avian patients no longer need to travel long distances to flight cages at other facilities to receive the flight training they require before being released into the wild.

This unique flight cage was originally designed and built by an avian rescue center in Maine. Their flight-cage plans given to us were adapted for our site by the good folks at Opequon Woodworks: George Ohrstrom, Eugene Folk, and Derek Hetz.



It was very important that the construction of this large building cause minimal impact on the natural beauty of the wooded building site. Eugene and Derek turned the plans and ideas into a magnificent cage.

A continuous flight cage is the best type of cage for evaluating and exercising raptors that recover from injuries. There is no other cage like it in Virginia. Pictures and a video of the cage are posted at [blueridgewildlife.org](http://blueridgewildlife.org).

Three red-tailed hawks, whose broken wings have healed, are now exercising in the new enclosure.

We are planning an open house so our supporters can see in person this unique facility of which we are so proud. Watch for a future announcement.

## Lead-Testing Machine Put to Work

With the help of our new lead-testing machine, we found that most large birds admitted to the Center during the winter months had high levels of lead in their blood.

We suspect their high blood lead levels were due to eating meat contaminated with lead shot because fall and winter is also hunting season for

many species. If an animal shot with lead ammunition escapes and dies in the wild, it can be eaten by other animals that will then ingest the lead shot.



*A lead-poisoned great blue heron*

It is interesting that lead shot causes lead poisoning only if it is in the gastrointestinal tract where it can be absorbed into the blood. It does not cause lead poisoning if it is in the muscle of an animal.

Four birds that came in with high lead levels had been hit by cars. This may have occurred because lead in their blood had affected their nervous systems, resulting in their being less alert or less reactive and increasing their chances of being hit by a vehicle.

## Screech Owls Can Endure

Every winter we admit a large number of eastern screech owls that have been hit by cars while hunting near roads. Amazingly, many of these tiny individuals can survive being hit by a vehicle weighing 2,000 pounds or more.

Even though many don't appear to be critically injured, almost all of them have injuries to the retinas in their very large eyes. Fortunately, with prompt treatment, most of these owls can still see and hear well enough to be released.



## Airborne in the New Flight Cage



This beautiful red-tailed hawk was shot through the wing. She had a serious wing fracture and needed immediate surgery, but she is healing well and is now flying in our new flight cage (see training cage article to left), along with 2 other red-tails that were hit by cars and are also recovering from fractures.

## Barred Owl Survives Serious Injury

After being hit by a car, this severely injured barred owl was lucky to be picked up by a good Samaritan before being hit again.

The owl had been hit on the right side of his head, and it took more than a week of intensive care before we were sure he would survive.

Unfortunately, we were unable to save his right eye. But, owls depend on their excellent hearing to find food, so most owls can survive in the wild with one good eye and two good ears.



He is now in one of our outside cages, participating in "mouse school" where we assess his ability to catch mice. He is passing with flying colors and should be released soon.

## Become a Supporter of the Blue Ridge Wildlife Center

The Center depends entirely on private donations to pay for its expenses. It receives no funding from the federal, state, or local governments.

Please consider becoming a supporter or wildlife sponsor of the Center. Supporters and wildlife sponsors receive *The Ridgeline*.

Your donations are used to supply food, housing, and medical supplies for the animals receiving care at the Center.

We are also in need of volunteers to help care for the animals and to assist with other related jobs. Please call if you are interested in volunteering.

Indicate your choice of support on the form below and mail it with your check to the Blue Ridge Wildlife Center, Post Office Box 326, Millwood, VA 22646.

Individual Supporter—\$50.00  
Family Supporter—\$100  
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### Wildlife Painting Silent Auction

During the Art at the Mill art show April 25 through May 10 at the Burwell-Morgan Mill in Millwood, VA, a very special painting (below) donated by local artist Anthony Barham will be sold by silent auction. The proceeds of the sale will be split between the Blue Ridge Wildlife Center and the Clarke County Historical Association. Tony Barham's life-like animal portraits have been top sellers at past Art at the Mill shows.



### Trail Ride Extraordinary

A horseback trail ride to benefit the Blue Ridge Wildlife Center will be held on Sunday, May 3, at 10 am at the Burwell-van Lennep Island Farms. The three-mile ride along a mile of the Shenandoah River features some of the most beautiful sights of spring; woods filled with dogwood and redbud bloom, and fields of bluebells. Eagles are often seen in the grand sycamores that line the river, along with osprey and great blue herons. After the ride, enjoy refreshments while you visit some of the education animals from the Wildlife Center. Call the Center at 540-837-9000 for information on how to participate.

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