



For the Love of Wildlife

STORY AND PHOTOS BY
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Baby rabbits, called kits, open their eyes when they are 5-7 days old and need about 3 weeks to learn to be on their own.

LIKE MANY OF US, Vickie Henderson has always loved animals. But in 2001, she put her passion for wild animals into practice. She became a volunteer for the Delaware Council of Wildlife Rehabilitators and Educators. Fourteen years later, she is a certified wildlife rehabilitator, or “rehabber,” as they call themselves.

“I started with mammals, but one of our rehabbers became ill,” Henderson said. “So I was asked to take on a turtle. I thought I wasn’t much of a turtle person, but that’s all it took for me to become one,” she said. I met Henderson and her daughter, Serenity – as



Hilary Taylor, a wildlife rehabilitator in Delaware since 1969, holds a baby raccoon that she has just fed.



Snapping turtles lay their eggs on land up to 2 miles away from the water and after camouflaging the nest, go back to the water. When the eggs hatch, they also find their way to the water. Unless a baby snapping turtle is injured, sick or too far from the water, leave it alone. They can take care of themselves.

well as two of the turtles they care for – at 3 Palms Exotic Plants and Petting Zoo in Clayton. The zoo is home to a number of wild animals that have been rehabbed by Henderson and others.

“Taking care of these creatures is not all of it,” Henderson explained. “A lot of it is about educating people. There are regulations on keeping wildlife, so the more I educate, the more people understand and care. This is what matters to me.”

She especially enjoys spreading “turtle facts” among the general population. In fact, she is full of “turtle trivia” and factoids she loves to share. For example,

she noted that some turtles live more than 100 years, a lot longer than most of us. “So a turtle may not be a great pet for many people, because they will outlive you,” she said. “Turtles may also be carriers of salmonella, which is why it is illegal to sell exotic turtles under four inches long. And, if you were to pick up a wild turtle and keep it for more than 30 days, regulations prohibit you from taking it back to the wild,” Henderson said.

When people find turtles or other animals into the wild – and need information – that’s when wildlife rehabilitators get to work. Their permits from DN-REC’s Division of Fish & Wildlife allow them to temporarily hold native wildlife in rehab until the animal is well enough for release or until a good adoptive home can be found, such as an educational center or sanctuary.

In the case of non-native or exotic wild animals, a permit must be obtained from the state Department of Agriculture in order to rehabilitate, keep, sell or import any non-native wild animal – like an alligator, for example.

Tick Tock

As we wandered around 3 Palms Zoo, Henderson’s daughter, Serenity, told me all about Tick Tock, a two-year-old alliga-



Tick Tock, an alligator that had been living in a bathtub, is now housed in an ideal habitat at 3 Palms Exotic Plants and Petting Zoo.

tor that resides in a specially-built habitat. “Well, a man in Wilmington was in the hospital because he accidentally shot himself in the foot,” she said. “But when officers went to his house to find the gun, they stumbled upon Tick Tock in the bathtub.”

Needless to say, it took less than a second for the officers to determine that Tick Tock was a non-native wild animal being kept illegally as a pet. Serenity’s mother got the call to temporarily care for Tick Tock. Anticipating her growing larger, and looking to rehome her for educational purposes in Delaware (rather than sending her out of state), Vickie Henderson asked 3 Palms Zoo owners Dan Stonebraker and Matthew Shaffner if they wanted Tick Tock. They did, but the process took some time. First, they got the necessary permit from the Department of Agriculture in order to house Tick Tock, and then they built a proper habitat that any alligator would enjoy. That was in August of 2014. Since then, Tick Tock has become



One squirrel, from a nest brought to Hilary, was smaller than the rest. So Hilary continued to feed him formula through a syringe. The others were able to drink from a bowl.

one of the most popular attractions at 3 Palms Exotic Plants and Petting Zoo.

Becoming a rehabber

In my quest to learn about what it takes to become a wildlife rehabilitator, I first went to a meeting of the Delaware Council

of Wildlife Rehabilitators and Educators (DCWRE) this past February. We listened to a presentation about the link between bats and white-nose syndrome, a fungus that is decimating certain bat populations in Delaware and throughout the country. You may not be a big bat fan; neither



This red-footed tortoise hatchling had been a pet and was turned in to a certified wildlife rehabilitator. It will grow to be 20-40 pounds.

was I. But after listening to DNREC wildlife biologist Holly Niederriter's presentation, I have since become very concerned for them and their well-being.

To care for or rehabilitate bats, or any other native wildlife, you need the license from DNREC. You will also need rabies vaccinations and bi-annual titer tests - which measure the level of antibodies in your blood, usually for your doctor to determine which, if any, other immunizations you might need. In addition, you need to have direct access to veterinarians and the ability to keep detailed records.

Volunteers – the heart of wildlife rehabilitation

In writing this article, I discovered that there are not a lot of certified wildlife rehabilitators in Delaware. In New Castle County, where I live, there is only one: Hilary Taylor. She came to Delaware from England in 1969. Having rehabbed before moving to Delaware, she recently started rehabbing here. She obtained the required state and federal permits in order to handle, house and rehab native and non-native/exotic wild animals. Now, her whole backyard is filled with housing for the animals she helps, including a small building she calls "The Hospital." Taylor is quite busy and needs as much help from volunteers as she can get. One former volunteer, Stephanie Shapiro, interned with Taylor for four

If You Care, Leave Them There

WELL-MEANING WILDLIFE WATCHERS should not "rescue" recently-born wild animals, according to DNREC's Division of Fish & Wildlife. Eastern cottontail rabbits, in particular, may appear to be alone, since their mothers often temporarily leave their ground nests to avoid attracting predators, returning only to feed their young.

"If a recently-born wild animal appears injured or you are certain its parent is dead, please contact the Delaware Division of Fish & Wildlife to determine the appropriate course of action," said Wildlife Biologist Joe Rogerson, with the Division of Fish & Wildlife. "This will not only help ensure your safety, but also help to ensure the best possible outcome for the animal."

Precautions to take with both juvenile and adult wild animals:

If you see a recently-born wild animal alone, watch from a distance to see if its mother returns, but be aware that this could take several hours.

Some wild animals can be unpredictable and sometimes dangerous, especially if they are in pain. They also can carry parasites or illnesses that can affect you or your pets, such as rabies.



An opossum that had been found with frost-bitten ears was released after being cared for by a wildlife rehabilitator.

If you must handle any wild animal, wear gloves and use extreme care.

Remember that it is illegal for Delawareans to possess or attempt to rehabilitate any native wildlife without a permit from the Division of Fish & Wildlife.

"In almost every case, wild animals should be left where they are found. The hard truth is, if you take a recently-born animal from the wild, you are almost certainly ensuring its death," said licensed wildlife rehabilitator and Division of Fish & Wildlife staff member Dawn Cox. "While you may see a recently-born animal alone, what you don't see is its mother, who is most likely nearby, waiting for you to move on. The bottom line is, if you care, leave them there."

For more information, call DNREC's Wildlife Section at 302-739-9912.

For information about obtaining a permit to rehabilitate, keep, sell or import non-native wild or exotic animals, call the state Department of Agriculture at 302-698-4500.

For more information on wildlife rehabilitators in Delaware, including a current list of volunteers, visit the Delaware Council of Wildlife Rehabilitators and Educators website at www.dewildliferescue.com.



It was close to Christmas when this raccoon cub was brought to Hilary. Since it was too cold for him to be released, he wintered at Hilary's, and has since been released in a safe space.

years. Now, she is attending Cornell University to become a veterinarian.

On my second visit, I met Teresa Harter, who was helping feed and water the animals. I asked her how she got started as a volunteer. “I was driving in Smyrna,” she said, “and saw a red-tailed hawk that could only move one wing. I went over and picked it up and put it in my backseat.” Harter said she tried calling one rescue facility, but it was after-hours and she couldn’t reach anyone. “So I called DNREC and they gave me Hilary’s number. This was a Saturday night, but Hilary told me to come right over.”

“When Hilary saw that I picked up the bird, she hollered at me for a while,” Harter continued. “She said I could have gotten hurt. The next day Hilary got the bird to Tri-State [Tri-State Bird Rescue & Research, Inc.], but it turned out the bird had West Nile Virus and died. But, I saw what Hilary was doing here and I wanted to help. Being a nurse, I only have one day



A beautiful domestic rabbit was found running around loose in Newark. Donna Vickers, Newark’s animal control officer, brought her to Hilary.

a week to help out, but I’ve been coming here on Sundays for about 10 years now.”

Throughout the process of writing this

article, Dawn Cox was my key navigator. She works at the DuPont Nature Center at Mispillion Harbor Reserve east of Milford. She told me she grew up and gained experience working with animals on her family’s farm. Later, she went to work for DNREC, with the Division of Fish & Wildlife. During her tenure, she worked at the state fair, the annual Delaware Coastal Cleanup and eventually became an outreach specialist. It was all “back seat experience,” as she described it, but it led her to become president-elect and educational coordinator for the Delaware Council of Wildlife Rehabilitators and Educators, as well as DNREC’s trainer/educator at the DuPont Nature Center.

“The Center partners with wildlife rehabilitators for educational purposes,” Cox said. “We focus on the wildlife of the Delaware estuary and Delaware Bayshore area.”

I was stunned by the beauty of the DuPont Nature Center. Shorebirds and horseshoe crabs abound in the spring. Once inside, I saw numerous nature displays – including one featuring turtles (actually diamondback terrapins) swimming around in a large touch tank, enjoying each other’s company. Visitors ventured in and out. A new volunteer, Jennie Elliott, also came in for the first time. Her major at the University of Delaware is wildlife conservation.

Wildlife tidbits

There are many opportunities to learn about wildlife rehabilitation in Delaware. Vickie Henderson, the “turtle person,” and Cathy Martin (a retired DNREC alumnae who originally mentored Henderson), headed up a presentation at Bombay Hook National Wildlife Refuge this past April called “Spring Babies.” They spoke about all the different kinds of animals that reside in Delaware, and shared numerous interesting tidbits about them. For example, all of us are familiar with gray squirrels. But did you know that Delaware

If you find baby rabbits, or kits, in your yard, place some string over the nest. Their mother is almost always nearby, and will continue to feed them. When you return to check on the nest, you will usually find the string moved, which confirms the mother is feeding them. If not, contact your nearest wildlife rehabber.





Wildlife Rehabber Dawn Cox, who manages the DuPont Nature Center, shows some young visitors a baby horseshoe crab.



This English guinea pig had been dropped off in the parking lot of the First State Animal Center and SPCA.

has flying squirrels too? They are nocturnal, so we don't usually see them. They love hickory nuts, so if you have a hickory tree, you probably have flying squirrels.

Cathy Martin said she didn't notice them until one evening when she left nuts on a feeder platform in a tree for the squirrels so they would stay away from the bird feeder. The next morning, she found hickory nuts with nice neat holes in the top. That's how the small flying squirrels get to the nuts, unlike other squirrels that are in too much of a hurry to make neat holes. Instead, they break the whole shell open to get the nut.

Martin and Henderson also did some myth-busting. Did you ever hear the warning to never touch a wild animal baby because its mother will smell your scent and abandon the youngster? "Well, that's not true!" said Martin.

She advised that if you happen to find baby squirrels that have fallen out of a tree, or any other young wild animal, it is best to leave them for their moms to find them and take care of them, rather than trying to and raise them yourself. "If you care," she advised, "leave them there."

A labor of love

Why do the rehabbers do what they do? "It's like any other form of volunteer activity," Henderson said. "It's a good feeling. Some people like to work with the elderly and some people like to work with animals. It's what your passion is. Once you start doing it, you feel that's where you need to be and that's what you need to be doing. So it gets to the point where you don't even think about it, you just do it."

Delaware wildlife rehabilitators, their families and friends, donate their time and energy for the welfare of wildlife in need. They are volunteers who earn no salary for taking care of the animals. They do it for the love of wildlife.

If you're interested in joining them, send an email to: info@dewildliferescue.com **OD**

For more information on wildlife rehabilitators in Delaware, including a current list of volunteers, visit the Delaware Council of Wildlife Rehabilitators and Educators website at www.dewildliferescue.com. The organization is also on Facebook; search The Delaware Council of Wildlife Rehabilitators and Educators.

Delaware Council of Wildlife Rehabilitators and Educators contacts:

New Castle County (above the canal)

Hilary Taylor – 302-834-4604
(any species)

Kent County

Vickie Henderson
302-632-0304

Cathy Martin
302-674-9131
302-270-9256

Sussex County

Bob Hughes & Margaret Colvin
302-228-8733



*Not all those listed above rehabilitate all species. Animals will be cared for, depending on species, by one of the council's members. You may be referred to an individual rehabilitator directly.

Other Wildlife Rescue Organizations:

Tri-State Bird Rescue and Research, Inc. – 302-737-9543

MERR Institute (for stranded marine animals) – 302-228-5029

LANE McLAUGHLIN IS A NEWARK-BASED FREELANCE PHOTOGRAPHER, WRITER AND GRAPHIC DESIGNER. "FOR AS LONG AS I CAN REMEMBER, I HAVE LOVED ANIMALS, EVEN A CRICKET WITH THREE LEGS I FOUND ONE DAY WHEN I WAS LITTLE. THESE WILDLIFE REHABILITATORS ARE MY HEROES!"

TO SEE MORE OF LANE'S WORK VISIT: WWW.LANEMCLAUGHLINPHOTOGRAPHY.COM.