

Southwest Florida Wildlife's "911"

Recently, I had the fortunate opportunity to spend the day at the Conservancy of Southwest Florida, Inc.'s Wildlife Rehabilitation Clinic. It gave me a glimpse of the array of impacts to our community's wildlife from fishing line, vehicles, habitat destruction to illness and diseases. As a few folks on the Island have done, I have brought wildlife to this center, but I had never seen what happens after the drop off.

The Clinic just hums with energy. Arriving before eight o'clock that morning, there are about a dozen people all doing different tasks, criss-crossing each other's paths, going in and out of the different small rooms. But there is not confusion or chaos. Food is being prepped, cages being cleaned, animals being examined, weighed, and treated for illness and injuries, and always the constant flow of laundry being done. On this shift, two of the Conservancy's Rehabilitative Specialists, with the help of several interns and many dedicated volunteers, work harmoniously in a never-ending cycle of feeding, cleaning and repairing and healing the sick and injured wildlife.

Jonne Miller and Jessica Bender were my guides to this Wildlife "911" world. It was explained since 1979, the Clinic has been open 365 days a year with hours between 8 AM to 8 PM, but that varies if there is call later in the night or if care of an animal needs 24 hour attention. The current Clinic treats approximately 2500 animals yearly but that number continues to increase. A new Clinic, the von Arx Wildlife Rehabilitation Clinic, is under construction and will increase the capacity two-fold and incorporate more state of the art cages, medical resources and support, public educational features and viewing of wildlife.

All injured or sick native species can find care here and eventually most will be released back to their natural environment. Some, due to the nature of the injury or illness, can not be safely released, so are kept at Clinic to be cared for and some used in educational purposes. There were some interesting "patients" at the Clinic this day. As I walked in to start work, a lady was carrying a box of Mallard ducklings that did not have their mother. She had found the ducklings in her neighborhood. In the operating room, an adult Opossum was being weighed, and a volunteer was holding a tiny Raccoon. Just the day before, baby Opossums, baby Raccoons, Blue Jays, Collared Doves, Pelicans, Crows and many more species were brought in and all had different ailments.

A large dry-erase board in the exam room, the hub of the Center, describes in abbreviated code each animal, its location in the Clinic, its dietary needs, symptoms, the treatments done or to be done. Columns show if a patient needs food, treatment or rehab four times, three times, twice or daily. Another board keeps tract of the many baby birds and a third board is dedicated to all the turtle species' needs. All three boards were completely full with a wide variety of issues. But no one was overwhelmed, just enthusiastic to get it all done. While doing examinations, stitching wounds, giving medications, vitamins, fluids or special diets, the Specialists have brief conversations about decisions on treatments and follow ups, techniques and new

arrivals. Issues get settled and no one ever stops moving. The old adage “it runs like clock work” rings very true at this Clinic.

My day unfolded like no other I had ever had. After cleaning cages, tube feeding a Brown Pelican, holding down a Collared Dove while its leg was stitched, weighing immature Black Birds, I couldn't believe they actually let me hold Brown Pelicans, an Anhinga, tiny Marsh Rabbits, a Cooper's Hawk, a Black Vulture, an American Osprey, two Red Bellied Sapsuckers, Gopher Tortoises, Box Turtle, Snapping Turtle, and an Opossum. Most memorable was holding that Black Vulture while it was fed by Jessica! (I won't even describe what it was being fed!)

The Wildlife Rehab Center is always looking for dedicated volunteers – some to pick up and deliver wildlife (Critter Carriers) and other for the Clinic itself. In the past month, approximately three dozen Marco Island residents have volunteered as “on call” Critter Carriers. If you are interested in doing this, please contact me at 239-389-5003 or nrichie@cityofmarcoisland.com. The Clinic requires orientation sessions and further training if one is interested in helping with the capturing, cleaning, feeding and care of the wildlife. Please call Joanna Fitzgerald at 239-262-CARE (2273).

The Conservancy of Southwest Florida, Inc. and its Wildlife Rehabilitation Clinic is located at 1450 Merrihue Drive, Naples, Florida. **If you find injured or orphaned native wildlife, contact the Clinic at 239-262-CARE (2273), 8 AM to 8 PM, seven days a week.**

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- Nancy Richie
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