

<http://archives.pioneerlocal.com/cgi-bin/ppo-story/archives/localnews/2005/a1/04-14-05-554551.html>

Algonquin Countryside
April 14, 2005

Animal rescuers keeping busy **Exotic pets, development of rural areas reasons for service calls**

BY KATE BRASER
STAFF WRITER

It's a zoo out there.

At least, that's how it may seem to residents who make hundreds of calls each day to local animal control and wildlife rescue organizations.

Local wildlife experts say they are taking in everything from raccoons, rabbits and birds to bobcats, cougars, deer and even alligators these days.

Often, wildlife experts add, these critters are turning up in people's back yards and even in their homes.

Staff at the McHenry County Animal Control facility in Woodstock are used to taking the occasional call of a nuisance complaint for dogs running stray or barking, but lately, a scaly creature they never expected to see in the countryside of the growing rural county is turning up.

Gathering gators

"We have had a rush recently on alligators," said Norma Spitzbart, McHenry County Animal Control Coordinator. "People are buying them illegally at reptile swaps and keeping them as pets."

She added the biggest alligator her agency has picked up was three-and-a-half-feet long.

"Usually, someone finds out about the alligators and calls us," she said. "I don't know why anyone would want them as a pet."

Spitzbart said the alligators are not euthanized, but are turned over to organizations that can legally harbor and rehabilitate them.

More commonly, county animal control employees are called to round up masked

troublemakers that find their way into attics and crawl spaces.

Unwanted guests

"We take in a lot of sick and injured raccoons," she said. "We try to tell people to repair holes in their homes so animals don't get into them and to take steps to adequately secure their garbage."

Spitzbart said these days, the majority of calls are coming in from growing areas at the southeastern part of the county, such as Algonquin and Lake in the Hills.

"I think we get more calls from that area because it's more populated."

Although the agency's staff keeps busy on all manner of calls -- from residents trying to locate lost pets to those looking for advice on how to help an injured animal -- when nature calls, staff have to be prepared to deal with anything.

"This morning, we got a call for an injured turkey along the side of the road in Spring Grove," she said. "You never know what to expect."

No one could agree more about the daily surprises that come with working with wildlife than Lynda Sugasa, executive director of Safe Haven Wildlife Refuge Center, Inc. in Marengo.

Saving doe at Target

"We assisted McHenry County Animal Control several years ago when a doe walked across Route 14 in Crystal Lake and went through automatic doors at a Target there," she said, explaining the deer was trapped in the store and detained in a dressing room by employees until wildlife rescue workers arrived.

"The story had a good ending," Sugasa said. "She had no leg fractures and nothing was seriously wrong with her where she couldn't be released."

"We try to release animals within a 10-mile radius of where they are found to avoid over-saturation," she added.

At Safe Haven, volunteers care for animals that include a bobcat rescued from a Crystal Lake apartment to cougars and smaller wildlife. Volunteers at the agency work with orphaned and injured animals to reintroduce them to the wild.

The 'ark' is full

Currently, Safe Haven is at capacity.

Sugasa said urbanization creates wildlife displacement and often brings in more cases of residents owning illegal exotic wildlife, such as the rash of alligators cropping up in McHenry County.

"The stories you hear like that of the tiger in a New York City apartment is very common now," she said. "It has created an epidemic in the country for placement of animals."

Sugasa explained the rules for licensing or owning exotic animals and breeding them are inconsistent across the country.

"These animals are often sold on illegal auctions anywhere in the U.S.," she said. "People go and buy a baby, take it home, and then it gets too big to deal with. The worst of it is that when people can't deal with them, they let them loose. You can't dump a cougar."

Sugasa added growth in this area is contributing to an increase in cases of injured wildlife.

New homes creating orphans

"Construction sites tend to displace nests and create havoc for the animals," she said. "This area's growth has substantially increased the number of orphaned animals we see."

As spring weather increases wildlife activity, Sugasa said the number of animals hit by cars increases, too.

"We usually end up having to take the babies and raise them," she said. "We get a lot of baby squirrels and bunnies and woodchucks."

Officials at Kane County Animal Control said they refer most wildlife calls to the Fox Valley Wildlife Center.

Located in Elburn, the private agency is only five years old, but staff say area residents are beginning to utilize it a lot. Last year, agency officials cared for more than 2,400 animals.

Becky Buzenski, director of Fox Valley Wildlife, explained that because her agency is private, it can accept animals from all over, rather than one specific geographical area.

Banged-up bunnies

She said the most common call they receive is about injured, sick or abandoned cottontail rabbits.

"Last year we cared for just over 400 orphaned or injured cottontails," she said, adding the second most common type of animal her agency cares for is the mallard duck.

"We saw just over 200 last year," she said.

Like other suburban wildlife experts, Buzenski says growth and development is one reason why her agency is so busy these days.

"People are plopping down in the middle of where the animals were living," she said. "These people are coming out to more rural areas and encountering wildlife."

Discontinued flights

People aren't the only ones finding their way further out to the suburbs from the city, Buzenski said.

"These days we take a lot of migratory birds from downtown Chicago, like woodpeckers and warblers," she said, explaining the city is built in the middle of a major migration path. Because of that, birds migrating from north to south and back often hit buildings, especially at night, when lights are off.

Each morning, a group called the Chicago Bird Collision Monitors goes out and collects dead and injured birds; injured birds are sent to Fox Valley Wildlife.

"We average about one or two birds per day so far for the spring migration," she said. "Last fall, we saw a lot. I think we took in 96 birds in one day."

The agency is not only for the birds, she said.

"Most of the animals we are working with are things you would normally see in your backyard like bunnies, birds or robins," she said.

Buzenski advises residents to resist the urge to keep the cute, cuddly baby animals they find in the wild this spring.

"We get a lot of calls later in the summer from people who found an animal in the spring, raised it over the summer, and suddenly it's not the same baby they took care of," she said. "The babies grow and get more aggressive. It's a real problem for us at that point because they've already been imprinted and are not releasable. It makes it nearly impossible to find it a place to live."

Contact Kate Braser at kbraser@pioneerlocal.com.

Pioneer Press

Copyright© 2004, Digital Chicago Inc.