

***A safe haven:
Orphaned and injured animals find refuge at wildlife sanctuary***

By Diane Ayers, Daily Herald Correspondent

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For Phoenix, the Northern Bobcat, the future looked pretty bleak when she was found living in a Crystal Lake apartment.

These days, there are not many housing options for wild animals in McHenry County.

But fortunately for this feline, authorities were able to find her a new home and new friends at the Safe Haven Wildlife Refuge, a nonprofit rehabilitation center in rural McHenry County.

"She's one of our more exotic residents," said Lynda Sugasa, director of the all-volunteer organization that rescues hundreds of opossums, squirrels and other native wildlife each year.

Tucked deep in a stand of old growth forest south of Marengo, Safe Haven is a well-kept secret, and that's just fine with its founder and staff, who spend long hours each week caring for orphaned and injured animals.

"Our mission is to help save these animals, to provide the care they need to be released back to the wild," said Sugasa, a licensed wildlife rehabilitator who started the sanctuary in 1998, as urban growth began to displace wildlife at an alarming rate.

Today, that threat is still growing and so is the Safe Haven Wildlife Refuge Center, Inc., a thriving nonprofit corporation with its own board of directors and a 20-member volunteer staff.

Safe Haven is one of only three Illinois sanctuaries accredited by The Association Of Sanctuaries, and the only one that is privately operated.

Sugasa also serves on the nationwide group's board of directors.

The facility is licensed by the state of Illinois and the U.S. Dept. of Agriculture. The sanctuary handles mostly small mammals, Sugasa said, but plans are under way to expand its facilities.

Volunteers are on duty seven days a week to care for the animals, field phone calls and help locate wildlife in need.

The group works with private citizens, veterinarians, police, and animal control officers

to find and treat injured animals, orphaned babies, or wildlife that have been kept as pets or seized from illegal breeders. Animals receive veterinary care, food, and shelter while they are recuperating.

The goal, Sugasa said, is to return as many as possible to the wild.

A recent grant also provided funds to construct a new "big cat" compound with three \$25,000 steel cage runs, where Phoenix, the de-clawed bobcat, and three refugee cougars have taken up permanent residence.

"We assist the county with a lot of animals, including some exotics like her," Sugasa said.

Tahoe and Savannah , 8- and 9-year-old cougars, came from an unethical East Coast sanctuary that engaged in breeding and selling the cubs for money, Sugasa said. "Monty" is 7-month-old cougar rescued five months ago by Montana Fish and Wildlife, after he was shot in someone's back yard.

"He has a permanent limp, so he will be a permanent placement," she said.

Squirrels, opossums, and other small mammals are always welcome.

Unfortunately, Safe Haven does not have enough space to keep raccoons, which must be separated from other animals, Sugasa said.

While they can accept fawns, there is no room to keep an injured adult deer.

And there are currently not enough volunteers to care for baby birds, which must be fed around the clock.

In such cases, she said, the sanctuary tries to refer people to other groups that specialize in treating these animals: "If we can't take an animal, we will find a rehabber who can."

Volunteers are busiest during "baby season," from spring to mid-summer, when well meaning people find nests of baby squirrels, opossums, or foxes, and decide to bring them in.

"They want to do the right thing, but they don't know what to do," Sugasa said.

People find babies alone and think they're abandoned when, in fact, the mother may be nearby or out foraging for food. Safe Haven encourages callers to return baby animals to their nest or den, and wait a few hours to see if the mother returns.

But sometimes, waiting is not enough.

Construction work, heavy storms, or brush fires can chase off the mother and force babies from their nests.

Cars or predators may kill or injure her, leaving the babies alone.

"In the spring, it's 16-hour days around here," she said. "Normally, your first feedings are between 5 and 6 in the morning, and your last ones are between 10 and 11 at night."

Baby animals are raised in aquariums or in incubators donated by area hospitals. As they grow, the babies are moved to indoor cages, then to larger outdoor enclosures outdoors where they are still protected, but can learn to recognize predators and other dangers they will face in the wild. Most wild babies are kept for a minimum of 14 weeks.

Once they have become self-sufficient, most are relocated and released.

She admits a special fondness for the bright-eyed little critters and doesn't understand why people are so afraid of opossums.

"Their only defense is to hiss and show their teeth, and to play dead," she said. "There's not much to fear."

Once released, opossums live an average of one to two years in the wild, she said.

Not all animals can survive, but with attentive care, most will.

It is those successes that make all the long hours and hard work so worthwhile.

Meanwhile, inside the clinic, a painted turtle recuperates from a cracked shell that was repaired with dental bonding adhesive and will soon be ready to leave, she said.

In another case, Safe Haven volunteers drove to northern Wisconsin to deliver a lost coyote pup to another facility that could raise him among others of his species.

The greatest danger to these animals is people.

"You really wouldn't believe what we see some times. We've had the FBI bring us (animals). We've had McHenry County Animal Control bring in a woodchuck that was beaten by a man who had a history of problems with the law.

"Sometimes it's easy to get attached."

Staff members are still mourning the death earlier this month, of "Teddy," Safe Haven's resident blind opossum who had become a goodwill ambassador for the sanctuary and favorite of the volunteers.

"Teddy had such a great personality," Sugasa said. "He will definitely be missed."

An important part of Safe Haven's rehabilitation program is the "enrichment" therapy offered by volunteer Sue Gardner, who drives out from Chicago twice a week to bring problem-solving exercises, a kind of occupational therapy for Safe Haven's animal residents.

"We want to keep them happily busy and occupied, and to give them skills that they'll need when they're released," Gardner said.

Enrichment activities prevent boredom and introduce cage-raised animals to behaviors they would normally learn in the wild.

Baby opossums learn to climb for their food, reaching for berries on the tips of branches inside their cage.

In the cat compound, cougar cub Monty playfully bats at a cantaloupe filled with chicken liver, then rips it open to get at his "prey."

It's a learning experience for both the animals and their teacher, Gardner said.

Dr. Glen Redeker, of Spring Hill Veterinary Clinic, donates his time to care for the sanctuary's many inmates, and local volunteers work in shifts to feed the animals, clean their cages, and take care of their needs.

Area Boy Scouts have built outdoor cages, and a large opossum hutch was an Eagle Scout project, Sugasa said.

"We have received a lot of help from Boy Scout Troop 63 in Carpentersville.

They've done squirrel and opossum enclosures for us, and I've done programs for them."

At the top of the hill, volunteer Nancy O'Neill held out a handful of mealworms to a pair of hungry sparrows, who flew down to eat from her hand.

"We're old friends," she said. "Normally we don't take in birds, but someone dropped these off on us. They were tiny, just from the nest, and they had to be fed every 30 minutes, so it was quite labor-intensive.

"They're very sweet, and they have been released now. They still come down to me once a day, and Judy and I are the only ones able to feed them at this point. Eventually, they will come more infrequently, and then they'll be on their own. We're just supplementing what they find in the wild. It's very rewarding," O'Neill said.

