

Developments hinder area wildlife

By Karen Long, Northwest Herald

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A red fox has made its permanent home at Safe Haven Wildlife Refuge Center in Marengo after being hit by a car and suffering brain damage.

An opossum that had been struck by a car and taken to the center was carrying 11 babies. The opossum will stay at the center because of its injuries, but the babies soon will be ready for release.

Safe Haven Director Lynda Sugasa said the center, which cares for sick or injured animals, has about 80 temporary and permanent residents. Calls to the center have doubled to 400 a year since Safe Haven opened in 1998. People call to report sick or injured animals or to seek advice on handling nuisance wildlife, which the center does not pick up.

"We get tons and tons of animal calls now," Sugasa said. "There are some months where your phone just rings off the hook."

Many animals - raccoons, possums, squirrels and skunks - have adapted to living in the suburbs, even as rapid development occurs in McHenry County and new urban dangers confront them.

Other threatened or endangered creatures are seeing their habitats reduced or changed by development.

The family of skunks near Candie Archambeau's home in Crystal Lake is hard to get rid of because it can easily find food.

"That's why they're staying here," Archambeau said. "They have easy living here."

Many critters find shelters and plentiful food sources in the suburbs, said Bob Bluett, wildlife biologist for the Illinois Department of Natural Resources.

"Those are ones doing well and adaptable," Bluett said. "Some of these can live in our back yards."

The animals are making homes in or near houses built on what used to be their native habitat, said Kate Halms, communications manager for the McHenry County Conservation District.

"They're displaced in the wild and looking to build nests," she said.

The human invasion changes the order and dynamic of the food chain, Halms said.

The population of some animals, once held in check, now is growing because the number of predators has been reduced.

"With homeowners coming in, we're removing their natural predators," Halms said.

Development breaks the food chain by disrupting the diversity of animal and plant species, said Lenore Beyer-Clow, executive director of McHenry County Defenders, a citizen organization dedicated to the preservation and improvement of the environment.

The Defenders monitor populations of Blanding's turtles, which are classified as threatened by the Illinois Department of Natural Resources, and the Swainson's hawk and Iowa darter, which are classified as endangered by the department.

"Some are sensitive to development and will either move or not survive," Bluett said.

The conservation district is working to create natural habitats such as Pleasant Valley Pond in Woodstock, where drain tiles were removed and wetlands restored last fall. In one season, the migrating bird population has substantially increased, Halms said. Herons, ducks and sandhill cranes have returned to the area.

Other animals find protection in populated areas. Red foxes have moved into the suburbs to avoid coyotes, which have followed the foxes into the suburbs, Bluett said.

As a licensed remover of nuisance wildlife, Mike Marchewka has seen increased demand for his services. The Crystal Lake resident said people call him to remove squirrels, beavers and coyotes.

"They have been pushed out of their environments," he said. "It occurs more and more every day."

Sugasa said the center has been treating new types of animals, such as reptiles, because of expanding development.

"A lot of people want to move out to the country," she said. "But they don't want the country in their back yard."