

The Ridgeline

Issue 18
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Newsletter of the Blue Ridge Wildlife Center

We Welcome Our First Executive Director

The Blue Ridge Wildlife Center has experienced an almost ten-fold demand for its services since opening in 2004. With that has come a vastly increased workload, an urgency to build a new facility, and the welcome addition of Jennifer Lee as BRWC's first executive director.

Her responsibilities will include the general administration of the organization, financial management, public and media outreach, and raising funds to support the increased demands and future vision of the Center.

"I feel like I've been preparing for this job my whole life. And it's way more than a job, it's a passion and a mission," Jennifer says.

Growing up in the countryside of Loudoun and Clarke counties, she has been an avid animal and nature lover since she could walk.

After graduating with a degree in Communications from George Mason University, Jennifer has spent most of her professional career doing development and outreach work for environmental, conservation, and historic preservation non-profits, most recently for the Clarke County (Va.) Historical Association from 2005 to 2012.

"I am thrilled and challenged with this opportunity to further the great work of Dr. Burwell and the dedicated staff and volunteers of BRWC," Jennifer stated. "And to devote my life work to helping this beautiful area's wildlife is truly a dream come true."



It's Time to Leave the Nest

Did you know that most baby songbirds will leave their nests before they can fly? This is a dangerous time for the babies and their parents because their young will be on the ground begging for food.

The adults continue to feed and care for their babies, but will try to stay out of sight so they don't draw attention to them.

After leaving or "fledging" the nest, a fledgling bird can often be differentiated from adults by its short wing and tail feathers. If you have birds fledging around your home, the best thing you can do is avoid the area, keep pets and children away, and let the parents continue to feed and teach their young.

Caught by a cat, this robin was brought to us by the cat's owner. Notice the short tail and wing feathers.



Opossums Overcome Heavy Losses

How does a species survive when large numbers are killed on roadways every year? Opossums are frequently seen killed on the road, yet their populations are going strong.

When threatened, rather than running away, an opossum will either play dead, or stand still with its mouth open, threatening the incoming car with its impressive 50 sharp teeth.

Neither of these survival strategies works well when dealing with an oncoming vehicle, or any of the other threats they face living in the suburbs. Yet somehow opossums seem to survive.

They maintain their population through prolific reproduction. Opossums, North America's only marsupial, produce two litters of young every summer which they carry around in their pouch until the babies are old enough to survive on their own. They can raise 13 babies in a litter, though the average is seven to nine. That means one female can produce 14 to 26 young each year. That's impressive!

We're glad they're so successful because opossums are needed to help keep the environment clean. They will eat almost anything, including dead animals and rotten vegetation, insects, and grubs. Just don't leave pet food outside or you may find an opossum at the bowl baring his teeth at your pet.



One of a litter of opossums rescued after their mother was killed on the road. These babies were still in their mother's pouch when they were found.

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Blue Ridge Wildlife Center
Post Office Box 326
930 Tilthammer Road
Millwood, Virginia 22646
540-837-9000
www.blueridgewildlife.org

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Newsletter

Belinda Burwell, DVM
Jim Clark
Jennifer Lee

The Blue Ridge Wildlife Center is a 501(c)3 non-profit organization that was established to provide assistance for native injured and orphaned wildlife and other helpful information to the public in the northern Shenandoah Valley.

The Center provides quality rehabilitative care for wildlife and operates the Wildlife Hotline at 540-837-9000.

The Center also presents informative environmental education programs for people of all ages. Schools and organizations are invited to call for scheduling and fees.

The Center relies on private donations exclusively; no governmental funding is used.

People who share concerns for wildlife and the environment can help the Center by becoming individual or family supporters.

Businesses are invited to become sponsors.

Contributions are tax-deductible.

BRWC Helps Avert Threatened Extinction of Bats

Bat populations are rapidly declining due to a new disease called White Nose Syndrome. The cause is a fungus never before found in the U.S., but also found in European caves where bats are resistant to it. It is so deadly to American cave bats that it kills 90 to 100% of the hibernating bats in infected caves.

Wildlife officials have been unsuccessful in preventing the spread of this disease, so we can only hope American bats will someday also develop resistance to it before they become extinct.

With this rapid decline in bat populations, rescue and rehabilitation of bats has increased in importance. The center has rescued 66 bats so far this year, and is currently raising 32 orphan baby bats.

Some of the more common ways bats become injured are by being struck by a vehicle or caught by a cat. Babies become orphaned when their colony is relocated, or when a colony abandons a maternity roost leaving babies behind.



Orphaned big brown bat pups being raised at the Center.

Did you know a single little brown bat can eat 3,000 insects on a summer's night?

Kit Foxes Among Record Number of Admitted Wildlife



Veterinary care at BRWC saved the fractured and infected leg of this gray fox.

Every spring the BRWC rescues large numbers of wildlife babies that have become orphaned, and this year record numbers of young wildlife were admitted to the center.

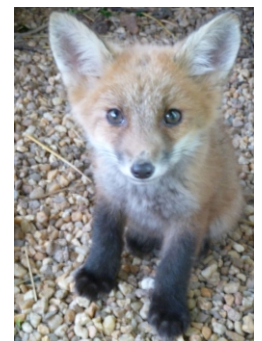
Twenty one kit foxes were rescued for a variety of reasons. Dens were dug up, mothers were killed on roadways, or kits were attacked by dogs.

Many of the kit foxes were rescued because they had mange. Mange is an infestation of the skin by a sarcoptic mite that causes intense itching and secondary skin infections. The hair loss and skin infection renders the animal unable to regulate its body temperature, similar to a human burn patient, and many will die without treatment.

Before attempting to treat a mangy fox on your own, please call the BRWC. The drug used to kill the mite is called ivermectin, and can be fatal to certain species of domestic dogs. This medication in food left for a mangy fox could put pet dogs at risk.

There are two species of foxes in Virginia, the red fox (*Vulpes vulpes*), and the gray fox (*Urocyon cinereoargenteus*). Red foxes have adapted to populated areas better than the grays who are more shy and prefer the forest.

A study of fox population DNAs shows that red foxes in our area, thought to be introduced by colonial settlers for fox hunting, are descendants of foxes native to Canada and northeastern states. (Read more at http://www.fs.fed.us/pnw/pubs/journals/pnw_2012_statham001.pdf)



This red fox kit has recovered from two leg fractures and will be released this summer.



Wood Turtles have been disappearing from northern Virginia, so we are always happy to see one.

This wood turtle was brought to our center after he was struck by a vehicle. His shell was fractured in two places. Because this turtle arrived shortly after the accident, the fracture and wounds were treated promptly and the shell healed completely.

Baby Bunnies

By Doug Pifer—I hate mowing. I always set the cutter so as not to mow too closely, and I only mow when absolutely necessary. I was especially glad of that today, as I started to cut a tall patch. A clump of downy gray fur flew out from the mower and four squirming baby bunnies were crawling out of the nest, apparently unhurt.

I IMMEDIATELY stopped mowing. I wouldn't bring any further upheaval into the lives of the babies. There was enough long grass left in that patch for them to hide in. Next morning I saw the adult rabbit in the tall grass where the babies were, so I assumed they were OK.

COTTONTAIL BABIES are born blind, helpless and pink, in a shallow, saucer-shaped depression. The mother lines her nest with downy fur she pulls out of her chest and abdomen just before giving birth. The mother covers the newborns with a blanket of grass and then hides somewhere nearby. She only visits to nurse and clean her young, usually just after dark and once again during the night.

YEARS AGO on a spring night, my wife and I returned home just after dark. As we parked the car, we noticed our headlights lit up the glowing eyes of a big wild rabbit. I noticed it was in the daylily bed beside our driveway, crouched with its front legs set unusually wide apart. Next morning I found a nest of baby cottontails in the spot where we had seen the rabbit the night before. We'd seen her nursing her babies!

BABY BUNNIES are weaned and fully furred in just sixteen days. Most baby rabbits people find and "rescue" aren't orphans at all. Their mother visits them occasionally but they are basically on their own, hiding and acting like adult rabbits. State law prohibits keeping wild rabbits and protects them as game animals.

Keeping wild rabbits is not only illegal but is harmful to them. Even with the best of care they usually die in a few days. Those that survive usually stay skittish and capable of delivering bloody gashes with their back feet.



Mother Rabbit by Doug Pifer

UNTIL RECENTLY, wildlife rehabilitators dreaded getting baby bunnies with their eyes closed. Even if fed with special formula, most of them died. Then somebody discovered a secret ingredient.

(IF YOU'RE enjoying a snack while reading this, you may want to set your plate aside for a moment). Rabbits, young and old, practice coprophagy—in other words, they eat their own poop. Not the dry brown round "rabbit pellets" you sometimes see, but watery droppings like clumps of olive-green berries, called caecotrophs. All rabbits produce them and often lick them directly from the

anus. Pet owners accept this as a normal part of life with their rabbitty friends. It's nature's way of allowing rabbits to get extra nutrition from their vegan diet.

WHILE A DOE gives birth, buck rabbits are already lined up waiting for her with flowers and candy. Sometimes within ten minutes of giving birth, she's expecting again and chasing the boys away. In the southern states one doe can produce up to five litters per season.

STILL, EIGHT out of ten bunnies born this season that are still alive by next fall will die within a year. Crows, domestic cats and dogs, blue jays, snakes, skunks, weasels, and even tiny shrews eat bunnies. Coyotes, foxes, bobcats, and owls are rabbit-hunting specialists.

PEOPLE ARE a rabbit's worst enemy. We kill them accidentally with our vehicles and farm equipment (and lawn mowers), and on purpose with guns, snares and traps. Worst of all we destroy their habitat. We're forever removing the brushy edges, weedy fields, and overgrown corners that rabbits need, either for cosmetic reasons or through residential and industrial development. And what gardener hasn't wished the worst for the rabbit that just nipped off her precious plants?

SO THEY TRY to beat the odds the only way they can—by reproducing.

Doug Pifer is a writer, artist, and naturalist. His art and murals have appeared in many galleries, museums, businesses, books and magazine articles. He speaks to groups of all ages about nature subjects and his award-winning nature column, "As The Crow Flies," has run for many years in the Clarke Courier.

Become a Supporter of the Blue Ridge Wildlife Center

The Center depends entirely on private donations to pay for its expenses. It receives no funding from the federal, state, or local governments.

Please consider becoming a supporter or wildlife sponsor of the Center.

Supporters and wildlife sponsors receive *The Ridgeline*. Your donations are used to supply food, housing, and medical supplies for the animals receiving care at the Center.

We are also in need of volunteers to help care for the animals and to assist with other related jobs.

Please call 540-837-9000 if you are interested in volunteering.

We're Digitizing

We are converting most of our communications to digital format. So that we can stay in touch with you, we'd love your e-mail address if we don't already have it!

We are developing a monthly e-newsletter and will send announcements on special events and educational programs by e-mail as well. We're not completely abandoning our print newsletter just yet, but communicating by e-mail will save paper and the cost of printing and mailing.

To continue receiving our news, please e-mail your e-mail address to jenniferlee@blueridgewildlife.org. Thank you!

Take your mark,
Get set,
GO!
to our post-race



≡ **HOOT** ≡
for the Wild Life!

to benefit the
BLUE RIDGE WILDLIFE CENTER.
September 22, 2012, 6-10pm
Woodley Farm

800 Briggs Road, Berryville, Virginia
(site & day of the Blue Ridge Fall Point-to-Point Races)

\$35 advance/\$40 at gate

Purchase tickets at blueridgefallraces.com



Enjoy tasty treats,
open beer & wine bar,
live music, & fun stuff!

Visit blueridgewildlife.org or call
540.539.6150 for more info

Wednesdays Are For Kids 7-12

The BRWC is offering Wildlife Discovery Camp every Wednesday at the Burwell-van Lennep Foundation's property (home of BRWC) through August 15. Each week campers learn about a topic involving wildlife, nature, and the environment. Hands-on activities, arts and crafts, and engaging presentations are all part of each camp session.

Please visit our website for more information or call 540-837-9000 to sign up!

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Blue Ridge Wildlife Center
Post Office Box 326
Millwood, VA 22646-0326