

# The Ridgeline

*Newsletter of the Blue Ridge Wildlife Center*

*Issue 22 • Fall 2013*



**Egret Returns to Wetlands | Turtlemania! | Wildlife Rehab | Winter Bird Feeding Tips**

# Letter from the Director .....



## Preparing for the Change in Season



**The** seasons are changing, and this means our routines at the Center are changing too, but not because of the cooler temperatures or the shortening day length. Our routines are changing because of the changing routines of our native wildlife.

The wild animals in this area have finished raising their young and are now preparing for winter. That means the Center will not be receiving any more orphan wildlife babies this year, so we can put away our baby bottles and formulas, our nests and pouches, and all the other equipment we use to raise the many species of orphans.

Most of the summer bird species will soon be migrating out of the area for the winter and will not be seen again until the spring. The bats and reptiles will disappear as they enter their hibernacula for the cold months. Squirrels and chipmunks and many other mammals are very busy gathering food and will soon retreat to their dens.

The cooling temperatures mean it's time for us to move our hospitalized turtles from the outside shed into the house where we can keep them warm and supply an artificially long photoperiod. This will keep their metabolism from slowing down and prevent them from hibernating, because their bodies won't continue to heal if they are hibernating.

It's also time for us to change the caging within our small house in anticipation of the changing species of patients we will be hospitalizing over the winter. The nurseries have been taken down and replaced with large kennels and portable cribs which house the injured and sick hawks, eagles, and owls we help during the fall and winter. We also need large kennels for the raccoons and foxes, opossums and squirrels that are so often hit on the road as they are busy looking for food in preparation for winter. As expected, as soon as these kennels were set up, we needed them to house five injured hawks, three eagles, two raccoons, and one opossum, all who needed hospitalization in the house.

No matter the season, our phone continues to ring with questions about animal emergencies and other wildlife activity. We are always happy to be of assistance to these callers, and very interested to hear what the public is observing with the wildlife in their neighborhoods, especially as the seasons change.

Above: Dr. Burwell with the BRWC's red-tailed hawk, Briar Rose.

## The Ridgeline



Published by  
Blue Ridge Wildlife Center  
Post Office Box 326  
930 Tilthammer Mill Road  
Millwood, Virginia 22646

Wildlife Hotline: 540-837-9000  
[www.blueridgewildlife.org](http://www.blueridgewildlife.org)

### Board of Directors

Robert Bonometti  
Belinda Burwell, DVM  
Laura Dabinett, MD  
Greg Ellison  
Lisa Goshen  
Judy Landes  
George L. Ohrstrom III  
Beatrice von Gontard

### Staff

**Dr. Belinda Burwell, DVM**  
Director and Veterinarian

**Heather Sparks**  
Wildlife Rehabilitator

**Jennifer Burghoffer**  
Wildlife Rehabilitator

**Andrea Donald**  
Wildlife Caretaker

**Frances Crawford**  
Director of Development

The Blue Ridge Wildlife Center is a 501(c)3 charitable organization established to provide assistance to native injured and orphaned wildlife and other helpful information to the public in northern Virginia, the Shenandoah Valley, and beyond. The Center provides quality rehabilitative care for wildlife and operates the **Wildlife Hotline at 540-837-9000.**

The Center also presents 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. It receives no funding from federal, state, or local governments. Contributions are tax-deductible. The BRWC is very grateful to the Burwell-van Lennep Foundation for the free use of their cottage and 18 acres of land on the Island Farms in Boyce, Virginia.

Follow our wildlife stories on Facebook!



Designed by Dara Bailey.  
[darabaileydesign@gmail.com](mailto:darabaileydesign@gmail.com)  
Printed by Winchester Printers.

## Cover Story

### A Most Fashionable Bird

An injured great egret was rescued by Fairfax County Animal Control on July 31. Because it was in need of veterinary care, it was transported almost 60 miles to the BRWC by Sharon Granzow, a dedicated volunteer transporter of injured and orphaned wildlife.

Great egrets were nearly hunted to extinction for their fashionable feathers before gaining protection in the early 20th century. The great egret became the symbol of the National Audubon Society, which was founded in 1905 to protect the many species of birds that were being killed for their feathers. Egrets are still a rare sight in our area, so we were thrilled to be able to help this beautiful bird.

When he arrived, this egret was very weak and had infected wounds on his legs and feet, along with two broken toes. Had he not been rescued, he would not have survived much longer. Over the next six weeks, we were able to heal his injuries and build up his strength. An important part of his care was providing this very shy bird with solitude and hiding places so he felt safe and secure, and did not feel stressed by his captivity. Stress decreases an animal's ability to heal, and can even be fatal. He recovered fully, losing only a part of one toe, which is a common injury seen in wild herons and egrets and is not a handicap in the wild. It was a beautiful sight to watch this graceful bird exercising in our flight cage in preparation for release.

When he was finally ready to go back to the wild, we enlisted the help



of Nicole Hamilton, a local birder and President of the Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy. She guided us to a private area of the Dulles Wetlands which was home to a large flock of egrets.

As we prepared to release this bird, the resident egrets flew up into the



*Left: Nicole Hamilton (green shirt) leads a small group of volunteers to the release site at Dulles Wetlands. Above: Dr. Burwell releases the great egret who is anxious to join his new group.*

*Photos courtesy of Dara Bailey.*

trees and hid. Once released, the recovered egret circled the area for a while, refusing to land until a couple of the resident egrets left the trees, joined him, and then led him back into the trees with them. We wished him the best of luck in his new safer home.

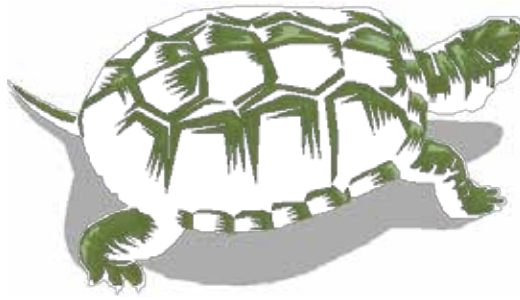
## Orphan Red Foxes Released



The orphan fox kits raised at the Center this summer have been released into safe and secluded habitat. They were released in groups of four and moved to their new homes in release cages that acted as a den with a backup food supply while the young foxes explored their new territory. We monitored the site with video to see how often the foxes were coming back. You can see the video on our website at [www.blueridgewildlife.org](http://www.blueridgewildlife.org).



# Turtlemania!



## Saving a Species

So far this year, the BRWC has cared for 69 injured and sick adult box turtles, and has already successfully released 42 of them back to the wild. Another 11 are still recovering; of these, eight will need to spend the winter with us because they will not have recovered enough to be released before the cold winter weather sets in. Like all reptiles, box turtles are “ectotherms” and cannot stay active in the cold weather. By the end of October most are already hibernating under the soil and will stay there until spring.

Box turtles do not reach maturity until they are 15-years-old, and will live as long as 80 years reproducing well into old age. But with an 80 to 90 percent mortality of their young, very few even make it to maturity. This fact increases the importance of saving these

adult turtles and releasing them back in the wild where they can continue to reproduce. Remember to always leave

box turtles in the area where you find them. That is where their territory is, and where they want to stay. They know where to

find food, water, and shelter in their area, so leaving them there increases their chances of survival.

On June 12, a female box turtle with a fractured leg and a swollen eye was rescued from the side of the road. This turtle was close to laying her eggs when she was struck by a vehicle. On June 21, while she was still recovering at the Center, she laid her eggs. By July 30, her injuries had completely healed and she was ready to go back out in the wild. She was taken back to her home in Aldie, Virginia and released, but her eggs were still incubating at the Center. On September 6, the eggs began to hatch, and over the next few days, four baby box turtles hatched. Because the mortality of these tiny eight gram babies is so high in the wild we plan to keep them over the winter and “head start” them. This means letting them grow to a larger size before releasing them back to the wild, and will also increase their chances of survival.



*Above: The rescued female box turtle laid her eggs while recovering at the Center. Four babies hatched and will remain at the Center until grown enough to have a good chance of surviving in the wild.*

## Another Fishhook Injury



On July 26, a Ranger at Sky Meadows State Park found a painted turtle in Turner Pond that had been blinded by a fishhook through his head, and sought help from the BRWC. This turtle had been accidentally hooked, then cut free and thrown back into the pond to die.

Apparently the angler did not know the BRWC can help when accidents like this happen. At the Center, the hook was removed and the infection treated, and amazingly the turtle regained vision in one of his eyes. After he recovered, he was taken back to the pond and released.



## Wood Turtle in Trouble

Wood turtle populations have declined dramatically in this area of Virginia in recent years, so researchers Tom Akre and Jeff Dragon of the Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute in Front Royal are working hard to locate the few remaining populations and study their behaviors.

One of the turtles they were tracking this summer became injured just as she was preparing to lay her eggs. Jeff was



following her activity and noticed one of her back legs had become wounded and swollen. After she had a few unsuccessful attempts at digging her nest, Jeff noticed the condition of her leg had worsened, so he brought her to the BRWC for treatment.

She had a fractured tibia and an infection so severe her foot was sloughing. We were very worried she was going to lose her leg. Female wood turtles need both of their back legs to dig a successful nest, so this would have been a terrible loss for her and her species. It took two months for her to recover, but in the end she only lost her toes. We're hopeful this will not be much of a handicap for her when she tries to dig her nest next summer. Jeff and Tom are going to continue to monitor her activity so they can keep us updated on her progress.

## Baby Skunks Survive



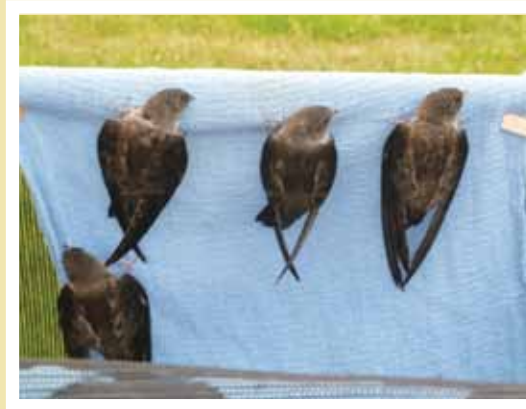
When we received a call about some baby skunks without a mother, the caller gently inquired, "Would you raise them?" Skunks are very important members of our wildlife community because they eat large numbers of insects and grubs. They are one of the few animals that eat hornet nests (they eat the larva), and they even eat the marmarated stink bug, an invasive insect that many of our native birds and mammals don't like to eat.

At the BRWC, we care for skunks and raise quite a few orphans every year, in spite of their reputation as a "stinky" animal. In this case, the mother skunk



# Chimney Swifts are Calling

Another box of orphan baby birds is being dropped off at the Center and before we even open the box, we know what they are by the chattering we hear inside. With their distinctive "chatter", baby chimney swifts are one of the noisiest baby birds. This group is crying because they want their parents to feed them, but how can being so noisy be safe for a wild bird? Wouldn't this lead predators to their nest? Not chimney swifts. These very



specialized birds build their nests out of sticks and saliva on the steep vertical walls, usually the inside wall of a chimney where they are safe from most predators.

Swifts are voracious insect eaters — it is estimated that a family of five consumes 5,000 to 6,000 insects a day during the summer. Swifts only come to this area for a short time to raise their young, then they leave on their long migration to Peru to spend the winter before returning again in the spring.

Chimney swifts numbers have been decreasing in this area, most likely because of decreasing numbers of nesting sites. Most chimneys are now capped, preventing swifts from nesting, and many new homes don't even have chimneys.

In addition, increased use of insecticides is poisoning swifts. Populations may also be decreasing due to the loss of habitat along their long migration route where they need to stop and feed.

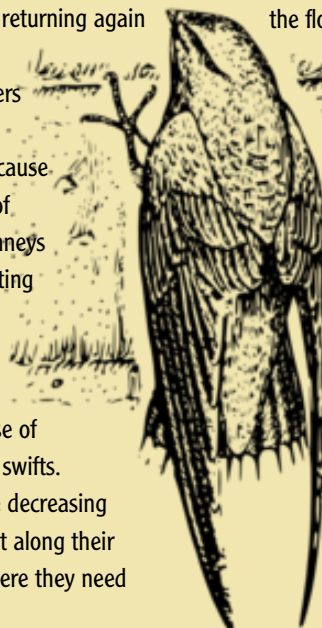
Because of the large numbers of flying insects they eat each summer, swifts are valuable birds to our area, so the BRWC works very hard to save as many as we can. Chimney swifts are one of the most difficult birds to successfully raise and release. Caring for and

releasing these orphan swifts is a time consuming endeavor because they must be fed clumps of insects every 20 minutes ten hours a day. This year the staff and interns at the BRWC cared for 57 rescued

chimney swifts — all but eight were released back to the wild. The Center purchases 30,000 insects a week to feed these babies and the other insectivores in our care.

Fledgling swifts must be released into a flock that will accept them, care for them, and guide them on their long migration to Peru. Releasing the fledglings involves finding a flock as they gather at dusk and calling them in to accept the fledgling babies. When

the flock hears the juveniles, the adults will circle overhead and call to them. The juveniles will take off and the adults will follow them and steer them into the circling flock. When all goes according to plan, we feel those new swifts have a very good chance of surviving in the wild.



*Photo Above: These fledgling Chimney Swifts cling to a towel on an open cage, and watch the adults overhead as they are released back to the wild.*

had been killed on the road, so the homeowner trapped the orphans and brought them to us. One of the five babies had also been injured and had large wounds on his side. In addition, he had a hernia that needed immediate surgery. We were very thankful to Roseville Veterinary Clinic in Boyce, Virginia for allowing us to use their sterile (and clean smelling) surgery suite for this baby skunk. Skunks do have a bad reputation when it comes to odors, but baby skunks rarely smell. Dr. Burwell performed the life-saving surgery, and after we were done no bad odor was left behind.

All five of these babies were raised at the BRWC and vaccinated for rabies before being released to continue their hornet, grub, and stink bug eating.

## Bald Eagle Rescued from Slime Pond



In August, a mature bald eagle was rescued from a tailings collection pond at a mine south of Richmond, Virginia.

These “slime” ponds collect waste water, minerals, and chemicals from the mine, and let the water drain back into the ground leaving a slurry of sediment behind. This wet sediment can become like quicksand, and when this eagle landed in it he couldn’t get out. He was rescued and taken to a wildlife rehabilitator who immediately bathed the eagle and sent him up to our wildlife hospital. We were worried about him developing pneumonia, or having other complications from his near drowning in this slurry of minerals and chemicals. The eagle is healthy and eating well, but his feathers were severely damaged by the very fine silt and chemicals in the pond. He can fly, but because his flight feathers are damaged, he has to flap very strenuously to get his body off the ground, and he tires easily. He is now exercising in our flight cage, and he has some new feathers coming in, so we are hopeful he can be released soon.

The BRWC has three other eagles under rehabilitation at this time. One is recovering from two broken wings, another is recovering from lead poisoning, and the third just had surgery to repair a fractured wing it acquired after being struck on I-66. It costs the Center a great deal to feed, house, and care for bald eagles. These birds consume large amounts of fish and meat which costs \$50 a week, and the large cages needed to house them while they recover can cost more than \$5,000. Surgery to repair a fractured wing costs about \$370. We appreciate donations toward the care of these animals.



The BRWC is dependent on your donations. There is no state or federal funding for wildlife rescue and rehabilitation. The BRWC depends entirely on donations to fulfill its mission. This entire region is thankful to those who have generously made it possible for us to help with so many animal emergencies!

## Feed the Birds

A bird feeder is a great way to observe songbirds. There are a few considerations before you start attracting birds to your backyard:

- Is the area safe from predators such as cats and dogs? You wouldn’t want to lure these wild birds to their death from a predatory cat. Although bells on a collar can be a deterrent, many young birds are seriously injured before they learn that a belled cat is a danger. It’s best to leave

cats indoors if you are someone who wants to feed wild birds.

- Are you committed to feeding the birds all winter? When winter approaches, birds will naturally migrate to areas with a steady supply of food. If you begin to feed wild birds in the fall, they will stay around; thus you must continue to feed them until their natural foods become available again the following spring. To the responsible person, the decision to feed wild birds is not a casual one.
- Different types of bird food attract different birds and it’s best to offer a variety of foods at different feeding stations. By not forcing birds to “wait in line” at the feeders, birds can be more observant for their natural predators. Most seed eating birds enjoy sunflower seeds and millet, common ingredients in commercial diets. You can discourage house sparrows, brown-headed cowbirds, blue jays, and grackles while at the same time offering a moderately attractive food to cardinals and mourning doves, by feeding safflower seeds. Safflower is of little interest to other bird species. There are many birds that also enjoy fresh fruits, peanut butter, and meal worms.
- When birds gather at a feeder they can spread disease amongst themselves, so it is important to keep the feeding area and feeders clean. Weekly raking under the feeder can help prevent the spread of salmonella. Bleaching the feeders once a week can help prevent the spread of a contagious eye disease of finches and grosbeaks called mycoplasma. When feeding fresh fruits it’s best to discard them before they rot or mold, ingestion of which may harm the birds.

Feeding birds can be enjoyable and rewarding if done responsibly. For an excellent quick resource on winter bird feeding please see the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology web site at [www.birds.cornell.edu/pfw/Members/BirdNote01--Winter%20Feeding.pdf](http://www.birds.cornell.edu/pfw/Members/BirdNote01--Winter%20Feeding.pdf).



## Eagle Scout Project Benefits Wildlife

When Joey Horner of Boy Scout Troop 20 in Boonsboro, Maryland was looking for an Eagle Scout project that would benefit wildlife, a teacher at his school suggested he contact the BRWC. When Joey and his parents came to visit the Center he decided he wanted his project



to help with the rehabilitation of large raptors. Joey decided to build a large

raptor cage for rescued hawks, owls, and eagles. These specialized cages take a lot of skill to build, and the large amount of lumber needed is very expensive. But with the help of donations from the community and Ace Hardware, and with the help of his fellow troop members, Joey built the

BRWC a beautiful raptor cage. Thank you Joey!



## New Building Progress and Planning for the Future

Having obtained the unanimous approval of the Clarke County Planning Commission and Board of Supervisors, the BRWC Building Committee met at the end of September to review the plans for the new facility, and to finalize the process of selecting a design/build firm for the new Wildlife Center. At the same time, the Board of Directors has been meeting to put together a three to five year strategic plan to solidify the Center's major vision and goals.

By January of 2014, the Center hopes to have a long range plan sketched out, a contractor chosen, and a capital fund-

raising effort quietly underway. As the planning progresses for all these activities we will keep our friends informed of our exciting milestones.

Meanwhile, please respond to our year-end donation request with a generous gift to ensure the BRWC can continue its mission of helping wildlife and teaching others to do the same. This year-end effort provides critical support for our daily activities at the Center, and ensures that we can continue to provide the very best wildlife care and education programs.

## Examining Raptor Retinas

Do you have an old iPhone you don't want? The BRWC needs an iPhone 4 with a working camera to photograph the retinas of our raptor patients.

Dr. Anthony Viti, a Winchester ophthalmologist, has donated an ophthalmoscope that, combined with an iPhone camera, can photograph raptor retinas and document some of the many unusual injuries we see. If you have an old iPhone, call us at 540-837-9000.



## Meet Volunteers Ike and Bill



Who do we call when the front door won't close, or the stair railing comes loose? Ike and Bill. Who do we call when a cage is damaged (which happens quite often when you are dealing with wild animals), or we need owl and squirrel boxes? Ike and Bill. Who do we call when we have a peculiar caging need? Ike and Bill. We need them so often now they show up every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday mornings to check our "Honey do..." List, which contains all the things we need fixed or built. Where would we be without Ike and Bill? We don't even want to think about the answer to that question!

Ike Eisenhower joined the BRWC after learning about us through his Master Naturalist Training Course. Once we saw what he could do we wouldn't let him leave. Bill Hicks joined us soon after that. Ike is a retired Marine who also acts as a foster parent to rescued Golden Retrievers. Bill is a retired Navy Submarine Technician who has been a volunteer for the Wildlife Rescue League for many years. Volunteers are extremely important to every non-profit charity, and committed and skilled volunteers like Ike and Bill are invaluable. Where would we be without Ike and Bill? We just can't imagine!



## Blue Ridge Wildlife Center

Post Office Box 326  
930 Tilthammer Mill Road  
Millwood, Virginia 22646-0326



Non Profit Org.  
U.S. Postage  
PAID  
Millwood , VA  
Permit No. 4



*On the cover: **First flight of the recovered great egret released at Dulles Wetlands.**  
Photos courtesy of Bill Hicks.*

## Day of Caring


September 11 was the United Way Day of Caring, and we'd like to thank our volunteers and the Clarke County Rotary Club for coming out on a sweltering 95 degree day to help us cut up some fallen trees, and clear the trails around our cages. The BRWC greatly appreciates all the help we receive from this wonderfully supportive community!



## Marmorated Stink Bugs

The marmorated stink bug is an invasive insect pest wrecking havoc to farmers in this area and annoying everyone else by invading our homes. A native of Asia, this introduced pest has no natural predators in this area and its populations are exploding. In Japan and China its populations are controlled by parasitoid wasps. Should these predators be intro-



duced to the U.S. to control these stink bugs, or will they kill off some of our native "good" species of insects too? At the BRWC, we are trying to determine which native wild animals have learned to eat this abundant insect. Skunks will eat them. We have heard that some native birds have been seen eating them and we've seen wolf spiders stalking them. If you see native wildlife eating these annoying bugs, please let us know. We'll keep you posted on what we learn. 

## Did You Know ?

**What makes poop purple and other scatological curiosities?**

Animals in the wild consume a variety of foodstuffs including seeds and fruits of many different plants. When a big glob of purple goo finds its way on to your windshield, its origin is often a bird that has ingested pokeweed berries, blackberries, or other fruits containing natural pigments. Along with the colors of the rainbow, birds and mammals spread plant seeds in their stool, often far from their original location. This spreading of seed is essential for propagation of many plant species. Some seeds require passage through the digestive tract of an animal before they can germinate. As an example, the hard seeds of our native raspberries and blackberries need to be abraded in a bird's gizzard and eroded by digestive acids before water and air can enter the seed and allow the process of germination to begin.

Who would have thought that purple poop would be a demonstration of the wondrous web of interactions that is Nature?



**Follow us on Facebook!** We post stories about the animals we rescue and rehabilitate. Learn about Virginia wildlife and some of the things that endanger them on our Facebook page.