The Ridgeline

Newsletter of the Blue Ridge Wildlife Center

Issue 27 • Fall 2015

Meet Snow, our Artic Fox Wildlife Ambassador!

Wildlife Winter Adaptations

Migration Time | Keep Turtles Wild | The Year of the Monarch | Coyote Ed 101 | Honor Roll of Donors

Letter from the Executive Director

Looking at the Big Picture

Dear Friends of Wildlife,

It has been nine months since I joined the Center as Executive Director. I am getting to know the community and I am meeting lots of wonderful people—many of whom care tremendously about nature, wildlife, and the environment. And I am learning more and more every day.

Whether I am speaking in front of large crowds, meeting with small gatherings, or talking one-on-one with individuals, there is one question that inevitably surfaces in each setting. That question, or a variation of it, is: "Don't we have enough robins, rabbits and squirrels? Why do we have to save each and every one?"

The answer, I believe, is multi-faceted, and telescopes from the micro—focusing on the individual animal, to the macro—focusing on the big picture of environmental health. This is the concept more commonly known as "One Health", recognizing that the health of humans is connected to the health of wildlife and the environment.

First, let's start with the micro—those individual animals that are injured, diseased or orphaned. Helping to relieve that animal's pain, assisting it to heal, and nurturing it to return to the wild, is an indication of our compassion as human beings. Whether a person believes in God, nature, or the universe, reducing suffering in another living creature is the right thing to do. When you or your child find wildlife that is in distress, and you care enough to bring it to the Center, the wildlife receives treatment that increases its chances of survival and release. And your children and grandchildren learn the lessons of life and the values that make the world a better place to live.

Second, nothing inspires a child's imagination and motivates their capacity to learn like an interaction with our native wildlife. They immediately want to know all aspects of the animal's habits and habitats. We consider this a gateway to science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) education that our nation so desperately needs. For example, a program on birds of prey, examining their hunting skills and the territory they inhabit can help fulfill many of the Standards of Learning (SOL) used in Virginia Schools for science, biology and life science.

Lastly, the wildlife patients treated at the Center undergo routine examinations, lab work, and treatments that provide a database of indicators on the health of the ecosystem. One such indicator in the future might be to track the biological accumulation of toxic substances in wildlife, such as 2, 4-D and glyphosate. Both of these pesticides are used heavily on genetically engineered crops, which include 80 to 90 percent of the corn and soybeans grown in the United States. Glyphosate is so pervasive that the US Geological Survey is now measuring it in rainwater, and its use is eliminating milkweed, the only plant upon which Monarch Caterpillars feed (see Monarch Butterfly story on page 5). Data from organizations like the Center, may be helpful to policy makers on both sides of the aisle as they examine state and federal legislation and/or regulations.

So while it may not be possible to save every wildlife patient that is admitted to the Center, each of these animals is treated with compassion, and is part of the greater ecosystem. In addition, they serve the greater role of helping us reflect our humanity, educate our children, learn more about our environment, and hopefully make wise public policy choices.

From rescue, to rehabilitation, to research, to education, the Center has its mission broadly set. Thank you all for the support you provide each and every day to help us help the wildlife.

Have a wonderful holiday season and a Happy New Year!

The Ridgeline

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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**.

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

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The Center relies on private donations exclusively. It receives no funding from federal, state, or local governments. Contributions are tax-deductible.

Follow our wildlife stories on Facebook and Twitter!

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Cover Story: Getting Ready for Winter

Baby, It's Cold Outside!

Our resident Artic Fox, Snow, shows off her beautiful light gray summer/fall coat before her wardrobe changes to winter white. Snow was confiscated by the police from a person who was keeping her illegally as a pet. She participates in the BRWC's programs about wildlife adaptations to winter, and also about the problems associated with keeping exotic pets.

As you pull out your scarves, gloves, hats, and ski jackets you may wonder how all the wildlife stays as warm as you do as the temperature drops. Many animals migrate, moving south to warmer climates and larger food sources. Others, like turtles and groundhogs, sleep the winter away, shutting their bodies down to the bare minimum and burying themselves underground.

But what about those who stay and brave the chilly season? Some like our Arctic Fox, Snow, have special adaptations to see them through the winter. While not native to Virginia, Snow is a wonderful example of winter adaptions. Every year around November, Snow changes from her light, gray summer coat (pictured right) to the beautiful ball of white fluff you can see on this newsletter's cover. While none of our native species go through such a drastic color change, our mammals, such as raccoons, skunks, and opossums, will grow thick fur coats to keep them warm and protected from the elements. Despite having a built-in fur coat, frostbite and lack of food still makes the winter hard on these animals, and we encourage you to bring any wildlife in need to the Center for help.

Where in the World is Indigo Bunting?

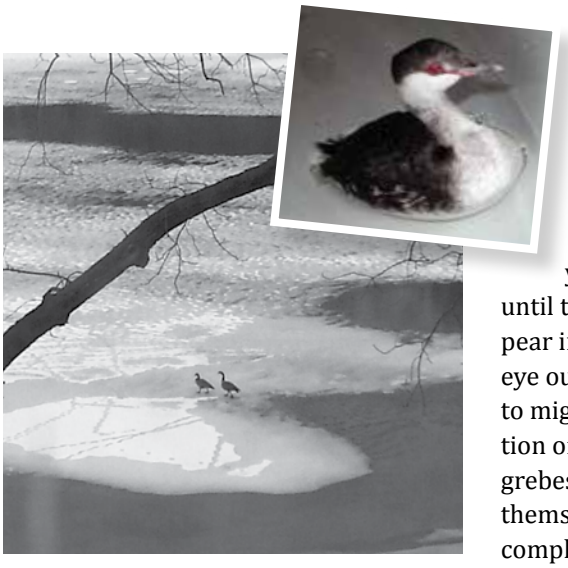
As winter approaches and the fall weather turns brisk, many people will begin to see new bird feeder residents, or wonder where their faithful summer diners have gone. With the days growing shorter and most residential food sources growing scarce, many birds embark on a practical and instinctual fall migration, some heading to warmer states just south of Virginia, while others commit to a journey all the way to South America. But how do they know when it's time to leave, and how do they manage to get exactly where they need to be, when they need to be there?

Birds use a wide variety of tools to navigate their way to their winter, or non-breeding, territories, and each tool varies with the species. Birds will combine senses in order to determine the direction in which they're traveling. Birds use the rising and setting sun just as we would to determine compass directions, allowing them to properly face southward when migrating. Some birds, like Indigo Buntings, will even use the stars to help them navigate while they migrate at night. They have an internal clock that allows them to adjust to the positioning of a star, even as it moves across the night sky. Some birds also have the ability to sense or to "see" the magnetic field around the Earth, such as Robins and Pigeons. With this sense, in addition to their adjusted clock, these birds are able to get a sort of global position of themselves along their migratory routes.

Homing Pigeons display this skill best when they cover hundreds of miles just to find their home roost where they were raised. Some experts believe sense of smell plays a part with Homing Pigeons, theorizing that they are able to recognize the familiar scents of their home and pinpoint home within a distance where the smell would get stronger the closer they got. Birds may also use landmarks from previous migrations to determine that they are on the correct route.

While there are residential birds that don't migrate with the changing seasons, there are also developing populations of migratory birds who choose not to migrate. These birds have found they are able to "mostly" survive our winters

with help. You see this most often with waterfowl, such as Canada Geese and Mallards, in our ponds and lakes year round, even though our winters are harsh enough that many of our ponds will freeze over. Most waterfowl should migrate to southern states where the ponds are open in the winter and allow them access to food and protection from predators. It's important to keep in mind that as harmless as feeding geese and ducks may seem, this may ultimately lead them to stay in an area that is not suitable for them over the winter, and may cause more harm than good for that animal. If you've been feeding wild songbirds with a feeder in your backyard, you should keep in mind that birds will stay if there is enough food for them to survive. If you decide to take away or stop putting seed out for these birds, it may be too late for them to make the full migration south. We recommend continuing to feed songbirds if you have already been doing so until their natural food sources reappear in the springtime. Also keep an eye out for bird who may be struggling to migrate. During the yearly migration of waterbirds such as loons and grebes, young or weak individuals find themselves grounded, and unable to complete migration. These birds need water to take-off for flight, and often find themselves fooled by slick blacktops and iced-over ponds when they are delayed by winter weather.



Above: *Two Canada Geese that did not fly south for the winter walk on an icy pond.* ***Top:*** *This Horned Grebe came to the Center in February after being found grounded in a parking lot. After a few days of food and treatment for scrapes on it's feet it was released to continue migration.*

Keep Turtles Wild

Walking in your backyard on a beautiful summer day—the grass is green, the birds are chirping, and you notice a "new" rock sitting in the middle of your yard. But now the rock is poking its head out and moving its little legs and trying to move away from you. It's a turtle! And it's so small and delicate and vulnerable, so you decide to pick him up. You have a little aquarium in the garage; you put some dirt in it, or maybe an inch or so of water and put him in. He looks happy, right? But is it good for him?

There are many different species of turtles and tortoises in the state of Virginia, but most likely you'll stumble upon an Eastern Box Turtle camping out in your yard or garden. Contrary to the term turtle, which refers to an aquatic species, box turtles are completely terrestrial, which technically makes them a tortoise. Many people will find them alongside highways, in the woods, or in the backyard when their dogs want to play fetch with them. Many people will take them home, thinking they're simple to care for. Every now and then, however, we will get a call about a turtle that people have had for years that just isn't doing well, or has some sort of defect or illness.

As simple as turtles and tortoises may seem, they're quite complicated to care for. These animals require a diverse diet that will allow them to meet all of their nutritional needs, most of which they can readily find in their own territory. These diets also change with age and development, and are unique to each species. When kept in captivity, people may overfeed or underfeed turtles, or end up feeding them very odd diets, such as kitten treats or hamburger meat. As much as the internet can be a tool, it can also be misleading, and make caring for a wild turtle seem relatively easy, even if this is not necessarily the case.

Turtles also require a specific wavelength of light, which in nature is provided by the sun, but in captivity, can be forgotten or ignored. All of these factors contribute to the healthy, or unhealthy, development and growth of a turtle or tortoise, so it's very important that they are cared for by knowledgeable and experienced people, and only if they are injured or ill.

We received a call this year about an Eastern Box Turtle with wounds to the face and legs, but upon intake, staff found a more devastating issue. The turtle had a severely deformed shell, such that the legs and head could not be withdrawn and closed into it, which is the Box Turtle's main defense mechanism. This resulted in a broken beak and lacerated leg most likely caused by a weed-whacker. This deformity could only be caused by improper care and diet, and it was hypothesized that she had been kept for a number of years in captivity, since box turtles grow so slowly, and then released back into the wild. Legally, in Virginia, you are allowed to house up to five reptiles, given that they aren't an endangered or threatened species. However, if you plan on releasing the turtle, legally you can only do so if you release them within 30 days, at the site at which they were found, if they are showing no sign of illness or injury, and if they were housed separately from any other domestic or wild-caught animals (with strict cleaning protocols between touching each). A turtle or tortoise may live up to 70-80 years, sometimes longer, and therefore is a serious commitment if you are planning on keeping a turtle as a pet, since after a month, you can no longer release them back to the wild. Once damage has been done to their development, such as a shell deformity, it can take years for it to correct itself, and only with the appropriate care. As always, we encourage letting wild animals be wild, so that these mistakes don't have to be corrected, and so that these animals may have the life they were intended to live. ■

Wildlife Goes to School

They have names like Rocket, Princess Midge, and Seymour. You love them for their furry cuteness, or their beautiful feathers, but they also act as representatives for whole species.

Every year, the BRWC strives to encourage the stewardship of wildlife in our next generation of children by introducing them to their wild neighbors—flying squirrels, opossums, owls, and more.

The Center does 60-100 educational programs each year at schools, garden clubs, civil organizations, and even birthday parties! Groups in Clarke and the surrounding counties have invited our furry and feathered friends to speak on all wildlife topics, from natural history to winter adaptations to when and how to help wildlife in need.

This year, one of our ambassadors got a special surprise. Our striped skunk Beeker, by special request, came face-to-face with Román Macaya, the ambassador of Costa Rica! We were also joined by Tim Hugo, the Majority Caucus Chairman of the Virginia House of Delegates, Fortieth District. The two gentlemen were participating in a Green Day event held at the Centreville Elementary School, where many speakers spent the day teaching the grade schoolers different ways to positively interact with the environment. If you are interested in a program, please contact the Center at (540) 837-9000 or at *education@blueridgewildlifectr.org.*

Blue Ridge Wildlife Center

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!

It's Morphin' Time!

This summer the staff at the Center was excited to witness one of the most amazing natural processes—metamorphosis. Metamorphosis takes place when an immature animal changes into the adult form of the species. This can take several steps, and often a lengthy amount of time. For the Monarch caterpillar, it takes approximately 30 days, and five easy steps.

The Monarch begins as an egg, laid on any of the over 100 species of milkweed plant, and in just three days, it will hatch as a tiny caterpillar. Over the next two weeks, it will grow exponentially, feasting exclusively on the leaves of the milkweed plant it was hatched on. Soon after, it will find a secure place to hang as a chrysalis, and after another two weeks, a beautiful butterfly will emerge.

The Monarch butterfly is known for its striking orange and black colors, and its remarkable migration. In the fall, these insects will travel over 3,000 miles to their winter home in Mexico, where they will hibernate in the mountains. Early in February, they will awaken, and begin the northward journey.

But these sleeping beauties will not be the butterflies you see in your summer gardens. The adults coming north from Mexico usually stop in Texas, where they will lay the first eggs of the season, and then die. When this new generation reaches adulthood, they will continue the journey, surviving for the next two to six weeks and laying their own eggs before dying. By the time summer is in full swing here in Virginia and the butterflies return, they are three or four generations away from those that left in the fall.

The young Monarchs hatched and developed here will complete the cycle, traveling back southward by the end of September. With the help of a knowledgeable volunteer, who herself helped to raise over 70 caterpillars, the Center staff found, raised, and released 17 Monarch butterflies.

Monarchs are in danger for several reasons. Since 1999, the Monarch population has declined by 90% due to pesticide use, urban development, and climate change. Pesticides, especially in crop fields, have prevented the growth of milkweed, the Monarchs' food source, as has urban development, as milkweed in considered an undesirable weed in both locations. Climate change may also be a factor in their decline. A winter storm in 2002 killed almost 500 million butterflies as they hibernated in Mexico, and scientists believe that summer climates may be getting too warm for the insects to breed successfully. Butterflies like monarchs are extremely important to the environment as pollinators, passing pollen on to new flowers as they visit each one for nectar.

The Center staff plans to develop a program at the new facility to continue helping these amazing insects, incorporating a butterfly garden and milkweed patch into the plans for the new education area. More information about Monarchs and how to help them can be found on the Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy's website *www.loudounwildlife.org.*

Wyle E Coyote

Virginia is home to numerous species of animals with whom we gladly share our homes, but there's an animal that tends to be less welcome in every part of Virginia: the wily coyote. With a reputation for taking livestock and pets, most people see coyotes as a problem that needs to be addressed. Native to North America, these naturally migratory animals have spread into our area claiming new territories and are here to stay.

Coyotes live in family groups but, unlike wolves, do not hunt in packs. The family group is comprised of a single breeding pair and the offspring of previous years. The alpha pair is the only pair to breed, with the older offspring helping to raise the pups. Coyotes are naturally shy and normally try to avoid people, being mostly nocturnal in areas with human populations. However, during the spring and summer months, it's more common to find them foraging during the day to find as much food as possible for their pups.

Coyotes feed predominately on rodents, berries, and white-tailed deer. Just as with any large predator, these animals help maintain a balance in their ecosystem. Controlling the rodent population is important for both wildlife and humans, as this reduces disease and damage done by rodents to houses and food. Studies show that a small percentage of coyotes' diets consisted of human-related foods, including trash, food left out intended for other animals, livestock, and domestic pets. Although these items are not a main component, stories of human-coyote conflicts are among the most frequent, but are also easily prevented.

There are a few different ways to deal with this species. Currently, in Virginia, there are counties that offer bounties out for coyotes, which means that people can be paid a reward for proof of killing one. These bounties are meant to control and reduce the number of coyotes in the area. Many people find this to be a short-term solution but there can be long-term negative effects.

A study in Colorado by G. E. Connolly showed that after 70% of the coyote population had been culled, within eight months the population had, at minimum, rebounded to its original size and continued to increase. When a family group is reduced, litter size increases from 5-6 to 8-10 with the reduction in competition for resources. If one or both of the alpha pair is killed, then the remaining offspring are free to breed for themselves, adding multiple litters to a territory.

Another means of removing coyotes is by trapping and relocating. In Virginia it is illegal to trap and relocate any animal from your property, but it is also inhumane to a coyote. They end up in another coyote's territory which results in fighting, injury, and spread of disease. In addition, they will spend the rest of their life trying to get back to their home territory.

The most humane way of dealing with coyotes and preventing human conflict is by a process called "hazing." The Humane Society developed a coyote hazing protocol with the acronym SMART, as a way to remember what to do when encountering a coyote:

- **STOP:** don't run from the coyote; face it.
- **MAKE:** yourself big; put your arms up above your head to make yourself look large and intimidating.
- **ANNOUNCE:** loudly yell or make noise towards the coyote in an assertive and demanding tone. It doesn't matter what you say, just say it with volume and confidence.
- **REPEAT:** your command and noise towards the coyote until he reacts if necessary.
- **TEACH:** someone else what to do if they encounter a coyote as well. Hazing a coyote out of a neighborhood requires everyone to be on the same page!

Note: The first time you haze a coyote he may not react immediately. If so, quickly running towards the coyote while staying big and yelling should cause him to run off. Just make sure he has a route to escape; never rush towards a cornered animal that has nowhere to run!

In addition to hazing, removing food sources like trash or cat food will prevent coyotes from having a reason to come to your yard. A fence at least 6ft tall and extended 6" below the ground will keep coyotes from entering your yard, and adding larger guard animals to small livestock flocks, such as llamas or donkeys, will help protect herds.

As always, if you need advice or tips, feel free to call the Center, or visit the Humane Society's website at www.humanesociety.org for cohabitating tips and exclusion techniques.

2016 BRWC Interns

Each year, the Center accepts 9-12 summer interns—college-age students who are interested in the wildlife field, and have a dream of a career working with animals. We will be reviewing applications for the summer of 2016 starting in March. With a new wildlife facility to be completed early in 2016, this will be a very special year to join the summer intern team.

If you know of anyone who may be interested in an intern position here at the Center, please refer them to our Facebook page for the flyer, which outlines the materials required. You can also email our internship coordinator, Heather Sparks, at ***heather@blueridgewildlifectr.org***. While most of our applicants are local, we also like to reserve 4-6 spaces for out-of-state students.

The number of spaces we can offer is limited to the amount of housing we can offer. Please consider hosting a summer intern or two in 2016. Internships begin in May and end in the first two weeks of August. If you or someone you know might be interested in being a host for next year, please contact Heather at the Center at (540) 837-9000. ■

2015 Honor Roll of Donors

As 2015 comes to an end, we are preparing for our very first published Honor Roll of Donors. This list encompasses gifts from January 1, 2015 through November 10, 2015. That means it is not too late to get your name on this list for final publication in early 2016!

We thank you for the wonderful contributions of time and treasure that have made 2015 one of our best years to date.

As of early December, we have treated 1,836 animals, more than ever before. Our staff has increased with two certified wildlife rehabilitators and two more becoming certified in the new year. We anticipate our new full time veterinarian will be on staff by early 2016. We have provided more than 60 educational programs touching literally thousands of young people through school programs, private gatherings, animal releases, social and other media, and camp sessions.

Opportunities for our future abound. We anticipate moving into our new facility ahead of schedule. We also anticipate an expanded camp program and the ability to give more educational programs in our new state-of-the-art Learning Center, for the first time enabling us to have youth, families and adults in our new facility interacting with staff, volunteers, and our Education Ambassadors—the stars of all programs!

Thank you for all you do to keep wildlife at the forefront of your care and concern for our environment. We wish you all the very best for the holidays. You can end the year knowing that you made an enormous difference to our native wildlife, and ultimately to the education of our young people.

All best to you and yours in 2016!

Blue Ridge Wildlife Center Honor Roll of Donors

January 1, 2015 – November 10, 2015

*The Blue Ridge Wildlife Center(BRWC) is indebted to the **Burwell-van Lennep Foundation** for their generous donation of the use of their land by the BRWC. They have allowed us to use their 800 square foot cottage since 2004 and have given the BRWC a 50 year lease on land for the new wildlife rehabilitation and hospital facility soon to open. We are most grateful.*

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January 1, 2015 – November 10, 2015

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Continued on next page.

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Our volunteers are the life's blood of the Blue Ridge Wildlife Center and literally save us thousands of hours of work and thousands of dollars. Our volunteers give up hours, weekend days, even weeks on end. They work to help the animals through a variety of important jobs such as summer internships, cleaning cages, feeding, meal preparations, transporting animals, carpentry projects, answering the phone, or doing laundry. Thank you for the wonderful job you do for our wildlife.

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